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ISSUE 361



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REVIEW

IT'S BETTER THAN
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“AT ITS HEART IT’S JUST A BIG, EARNEST CELEBRATION OF GAMES”



ROBIN VALENTINE

Twitter

@robinlvalentine

This month

Got his neck permanently stuck at an angle. A small price to pay for a great looking cover.

loads of space for great articles and features too – including a dive into the brilliantly ambitious *Dying Light 2: Stay Human*, a game whose mix of zombie open world action and RPG-like reactivity is more tantalising than a fresh, juicy brain...

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



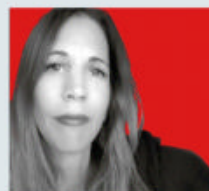
JAMES DAVENPORT

Twitter

@FraserIBrown

This month

Took a week off for once, though he just played 4Xs and moaned which is what he does here anyway.



SARAH JAMES

Twitter

@vision_burn

This month

Pushed her frankly unhealthy love of wolves to its absolute limits with *Valheim* mods.



RACHEL WATTS

Twitter

@rachel_watts

This month

Kept telling us about her 'boyfriend dungeon'. Save it for the weekend, Watts.



ANDY KELLY

Twitter

@ultrabrilliant

This month

Sadly leaves us for pastures new! We'll miss you, you wonderful, brilliant traitor.

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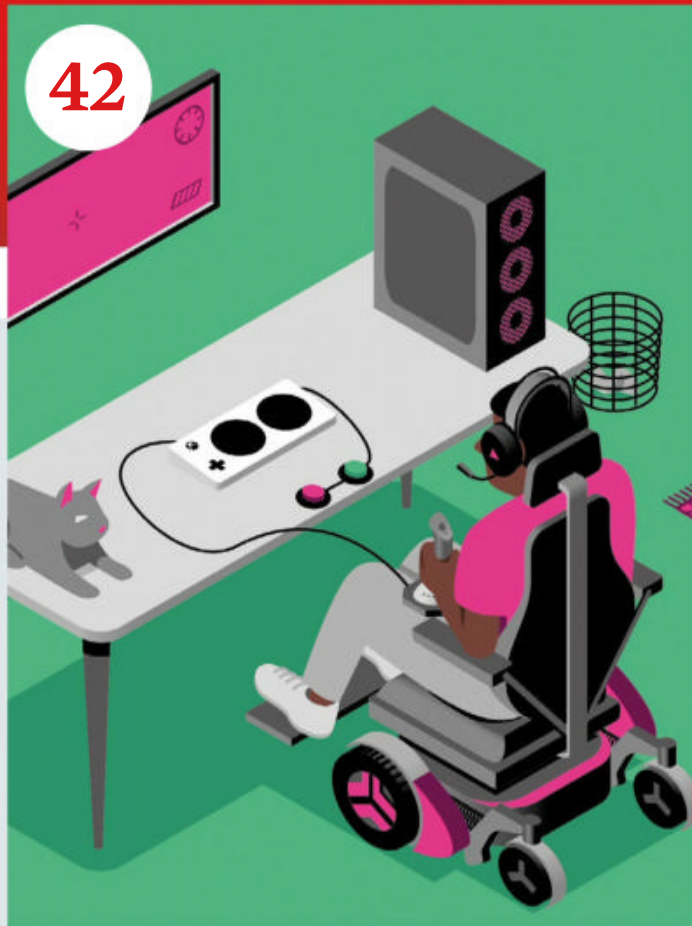
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Image credit: Flame2512

OFFICIAL IDIOTS ACT

WAR THUNDER fan says tank is inaccurate, leaks classified military documents to prove it

The Challenger 2 is a British tank that's been in service since 1994, and has seen service in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Iraq. It's also found in *War Thunder*, Gaijin Entertainment's free online game.

There's a commitment to accuracy in *War Thunder*: realistic vehicle and weapon physics, which players partake in spirited discussions about in the forums. The Challenger 2's debut, for instance, sparked a thread 319 pages long (and growing).

Things got out of hand in early July, however, when one player

The *War Thunder* wiki describes the Challenger 2 as "a force to be reckoned [with] on the battlefield, thanks to competent grades in firepower and armour", although a number of distinct shortcomings means that it really needs a skilled commander to make the most of it.

demonstrated slightly too much commitment to realism. The player, who claims to be a Challenger 2 commander and formerly of the British Army's Armoured Trials and Development Unit, complained the in-game model is inaccurate and more vulnerable than in reality – then, to prove it, posted classified

**IT'S UNKNOWN
WHETHER THE PLAYER
IS ACTUALLY A TANK
COMMANDER**

images from the Challenger 2 Army Equipment Support Publication – basically the user manual.

TANKS A LOT

The images were redacted and carried "UK Restricted" labels, but a stamp of "Unclassified" was added. Gaijin was cautious, saying "proof of this document's declassification will be required as well as where it was sourced from", before any response.

Shortly afterwards, a moderator said Gaijin had been in contact with the UK MoD, which informed it, in writing, that the manual is classified.

"I can confirm that it does appear to be a genuine extract," a Defence

WRECKED IN ROTATION

EVGA 3090S ROASTED



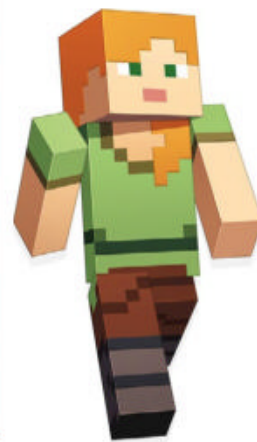
Reports surfaced of \$1,500 EVGA GeForce RTX 3090s getting fried as fans reached 200,000 RPM (against the usual 2,400 RPM) in Amazon's *New World* MMO's menu screens. EVGA has pledged to replace all affected GPUs, and Amazon has pushed out a patch that seems to have fixed the issue. ■ **KW**

QUEEN'S ENGLISH

FF XVI CLUES



Final Fantasy XVI director Naoki Yoshida has revealed that Square Enix is prioritising British English VO for its cast of characters. That should lend this medieval-flavoured sequel a touch of class, and avoid the usual JRPG trope of LA-based actors making every character sound the same. ■ **AK**



ADULTS ONLY

R-RATED MINECRAFT



Thanks to South Korea's bizarre Shutdown Law and *Minecraft*'s recent Xbox Live requirement, the poor game got inadvertently slapped with an adults-only rating. South Koreans now need to be 19 to buy the game, though Microsoft has said it's working on a solution for the whole ordeal. ■ **MT**



The final flourish is that, while sharing classified MoD documents in the *War Thunder* forums might be a violation of the Official Secrets Act, it is apparently not a bannable offence: the account that posted the images is still valid and, by all appearances, in good standing.

Equipment and Support spokesman at Abbey Wood wrote. "It certainly has not been released under FOI previously by DE&S or considered for redacting. We also do not recognise the 'Unclassified' stamp."

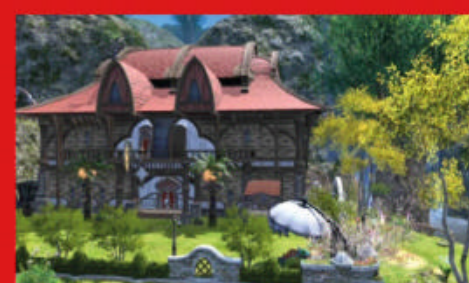
A Gaijin moderator then told the original poster, "By continuing to disseminate it you are in violation of the Official Secrets Act as stated by the warning on the cover of the document, an offence which can carry up to a 14-year prison sentence if prosecuted."

It's unknown whether the player is actually a tank commander although, as the UK Defence Journal notes, their claimed location of Tidworth, Wiltshire is the home of the Royal Tank Regiment.

This all began with a dispute over the size of the gap between the main turret and hull. Unfortunately their efforts for the Challenger 2 were for naught: because the documents are classified, they're not "valid source material" and so no changes will follow.

"We use only documents that are non-classified," Gaijin says. "When a user publishes a classified document at the official forum, we delete it ASAP. We cannot possibly know the real identity of the user with the document, but many *War Thunder* players are serving in the armies of various countries, so everything is possible." ■ **Andy Chalk**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Gabe Gear

A pleasant surprise about the Steam Deck was the reasonable cost of £349/\$399 for the basic model.

Doggone

Snoop Dogg's Twitch stream was muted for days without him realising.

Fighting Fantasy

Final Fantasy XIV is on a tear, with Square-Enix even briefly running out of digital copies.

Crypt-no

Reports from China indicate crypto-miners are beginning to try and sell used cards in bulk.

Bad code

Microsoft employee Volodymyr Kvashuk exchanged Xbox gift codes for \$10 million in Bitcoin over 2017-2019: he's just been jailed for nine years and fined \$8.3 million.

Last-gen FIFA

FIFA 2022's PC version lacks the 'Hypermotion' animation system.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

On July 20, 2021, book store owner Jeff Bezos went to space. Also on July 20, 2021, *New World* – an MMO developed by that same book store’s videogame development studio – launched into closed beta. Coincidence? The less imaginative among you may think so. But how about this? On July 11, 2021, Virgin founder Richard Branson went to space. On an unknown date in September, 1993, Virgin’s videogame publishing division released Jimmy White’s *Whirlwind Snooker* – named the 37th best game of all time by PC Gamer just one year later.

The Spy could also note that Jimmy White’s *Whirlwind Snooker* is currently available to buy second hand on Amazon for £9.85, although a one-star review from user ‘william 1st’ warns that “this will not work unless you can get Dos on your computer”. This, as far as The Spy can tell, is unrelated. That’s the thing about uncovering a conspiracy: you need to know when to stop digging.

Here’s the key headline, then: right now, exactly 100% of the billionaires spending grotesque sums of money to visit space are tenuously connected to the games industry. Why is this? Is it conceited to suggest that they’ve somehow discovered The Spy’s vow to never visit space, made after The Spy watched *Alien* and developed an innate fear of being trapped in an

enclosed space with a crew of rag-tag misfits? The Spy is convinced that this is just the first step towards a mass exodus of gaming CEOs in an effort to protect their secrets.

TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

For now, though, the CEOs remain chained to the planet; their secrets still ripe for plucking. Hence the emergence of rumours that the next *Assassin’s Creed* will be a “massive online platform”, featuring multiple settings that expand throughout its life. The source here is Bloomberg’s Jason Schreier, who cites a plethora of anonymous folk familiar with the game’s development. If the report is to be believed, individual parts of this live-service project, titled *Assassin’s Creed Infinity*, will potentially look and feel different to one another – but will be connected.

Following the report, Ubisoft confirmed that, yes, *Assassin’s Creed Infinity* does exist, and will be a joint project between Ubisoft Montreal, who most recently made *Valhalla*, and Ubisoft Quebec, who most recently made *Odyssey*. Ubisoft doesn’t, however, confirm that *Infinity* will be live service. It makes sense though. First, it’s called ‘*Infinity*’, which is the sort of thing you might call a game that categorically isn’t tied to a particular time and/or place. Second, that’s just the way the industry is leaning right now. We can blame *Fortnite* for spearheading an interest in ‘metaverse’ platforms over self-contained games, sure. But there’s likely more to it than just that.

Only last month, The Spy wrote about the *GTA VI* rumours that suggested it would grow and expand post-launch, in part because this would allow Rockstar to ship a smaller-than-expected map. This would also make sense for *Assassin’s Creed*, especially after the gargantuan *Valhalla*. These are huge worlds, and their development has become more difficult due to the pandemic. Given that, the chance to release a smaller game that has

massive scope for expansion must seem like an attractive alternative.

But yes, we also know – thanks to *Fortnite*, et al – that such endeavours can also be wildly profitable. Naturally this is desirable for publishers. Those spaceships aren’t going to pay for themselves. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THEY’VE SOMEHOW DISCOVERED THE SPY’S VOW TO NEVER VISIT SPACE



THE SPY
The Spy will never be out of this world.

This month in... 2011



1 Headlined by *Guild Wars 2*, and supported by *WildStar*, *The Old Republic*, and *The Secret World*, October 2011’s PC Gamer spotlighted the many ways developers were experimenting with MMOs. It’s easy to be sniffy about the MMOs that didn’t kill *WoW*, but all of these were (and, in some cases, still are) interesting attempts to do something new.

ISSUE
231, October 2011
ON THE COVER
Guild Wars 2
IN THE CINEMAS
Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

2 We look at *Garbage Truck Simulator 2011*. “Impossible to enjoy even in that ironic manner you can often get away with in games like these,” says our 32% review.



3 It’s the end of an era, as PC Gamer publishes the final cover disc. We pour one out for the long-running freebie with a plethora of demos from across the years, from *Deus Ex* to *World of Goo*, as well as the usual series of free games, mods, and trailers. But the best thing here is an offline version of the old PC Gamer *Minecraft* server.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



ANALOG FLICK

BOOMERANG X brings gamepad control closer to mouse-aim than ever

Boomerang X is an arena shooter that shouldn't work on a gamepad. You're able to toss a mystical bladed boomerang like it's an extension of your body, dragging its wide arc through multiple enemies, recalling it whenever you like, and even magnetising yourself to its current location. This is a game where you can't stop moving, where success is found dancing through the air, whipping the camera around to poke at half a dozen goo monsters from across the map in a single leap. Mouse-aim is almost required.

Even with decades of experience with my trusty mouse and keyboard, I found it pretty demanding. So in an effort to bring *Boomerang X* to as many people as possible, the team at Dang! turned to an emerging, experimental gamepad control scheme as a means of keeping the action as pure as possible, no aim-assist or odd stick acceleration taking the wind out of things. *Boomerang X* is the first commercial game to use Flick Stick, a gyro-based scheme that makes the dual analogue method feel old fashioned.

Flick Stick pushes gyro controls beyond their more common implementation. Maybe you've played *Splatoon* on the Nintendo Switch, where one control scheme maps vertical aim to the tilt of the controller, while horizontal aim and movement work as usual on the sticks. Rather

than use the right stick to push the camera left or right based on directional input, Flick Stick smoothly snaps the camera to an angle relative to their current orientation.

X FACTOR

For example, if you're facing forward and there's an enemy behind you, if you press directly back on the stick, the camera will do a quick 180, almost like controlling a top-down arcade shooter. Vertical aim is then mapped to the gyro, which allows the player to account for X and Y aim independently and far more intuitively than nudging a direction on the stick, squeezing two variables into one mushy input, banking on camera acceleration guesswork and aim-assist to carry your intention through.

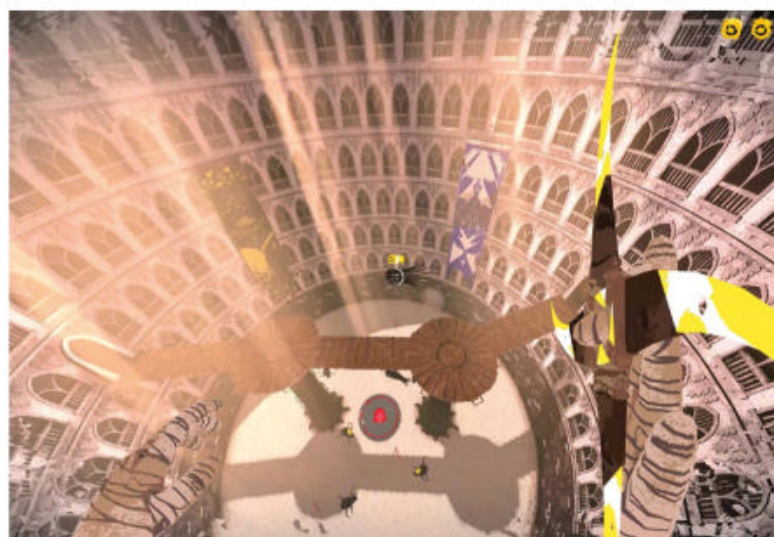
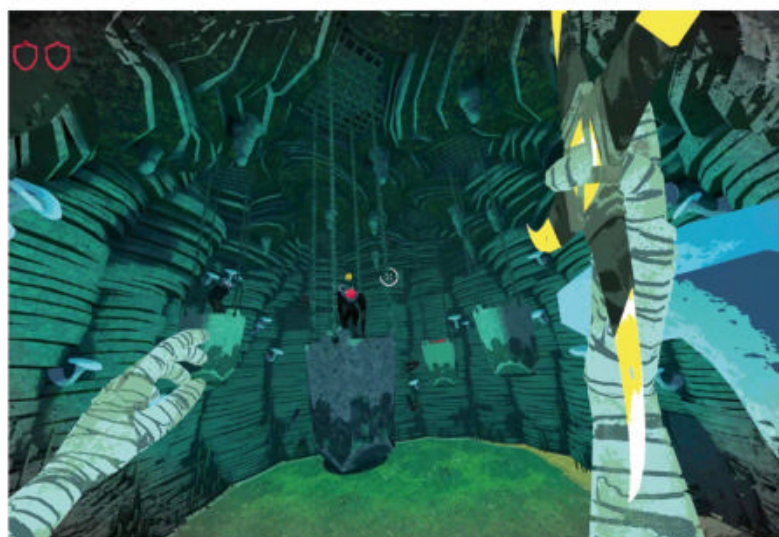
Sam Suite, one of the co-leads on *Boomerang X*, has a clever way of describing Flick Stick, "Rather than using the right joystick to look around, you're looking around in the immediate vicinity, as if your neck was in your hands."

The creator of Flick Stick is a developer that goes by JibbSmart, who's written the gyro control bible on their website and shares the code used to build the scheme openly there. They demonstrate the ethos, implementation, and accuracy of Flick Stick in detail, working through *CS:GO* matches with relative ease, whipping the aiming reticle around with the same reflex and accuracy games designed with mouse-aim first



Test drive

It's possible to try out Flick Stick on nearly any PC FPS using JibbSmart's JoyShockMapper program. With a bit of time spent tweaking variables for each game and a gyro-equipped gamepad, you can play anything from *Battlefield 1* to *Guild Wars* using the experimental control scheme. For complete instructions, head to gyrowiki.jibbsmart.com.



FAR LEFT: Luckily, it doesn't take any quick reflexes to respect and admire this large bug.

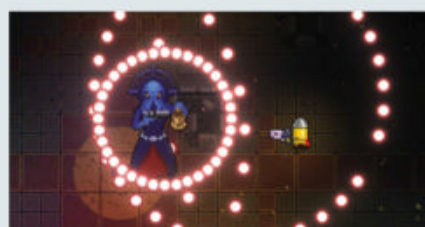
LEFT: Managing dozens of threats from every angle while flying through the air is the norm in *Boomerang X*.

FLICK FINDINGS *I played some games using Flick Stick. Here's what worked best*



DEAD SPACE 3

My new preferred way to play. Analogue directional control plus fine-tuned aim just feel perfect.



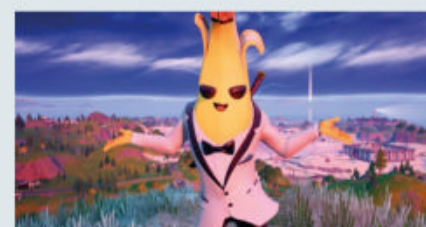
ENTER THE GUNGEON

I prefer the stick for arcade shooters. Having a centrepiece for resistance and reference makes aim easier.



CITIES SKYLINES

A keyboard is still ideal for all the shortcuts it allows, but Flick Stick is an excellent way to play from the couch.



FORTNITE

Flicking the controller to summon a box around myself? Much more natural than analogue guesswork.

demand. It's a proof of concept on its own, but *Boomerang X*'s great implementation could call even more attention to the benefits of Flick Stick.

In fast-paced shooters like *Boomerang X*, where enemies are constantly encroaching or sending out shadowy waves of dark energy from every direction, Flick Stick effectively evens the playing field for gamepad and mouse-aim control methods. For developers, the widespread adoption of Flick Stick means far less design contortionism – it gives them the leeway to make games under the assumption that everyone will be playing with the means to move and aim quickly and accurately.

But that all assumes a perfect world.

Flick Stick requires a gyro sensor to work, and Xbox controllers are the only gamepad from the major console manufacturers without one built in.

There's also a huge cultural barrier: the FPS gamepad control method has been dual analogue for decades now, which won't come undone overnight, or ever, potentially. Shooters have been designed around the shortcomings of dual analogue control for just as long, and leaving dual analogue behind for good would likely require a huge shift away from the comfort zone of big reticles and generous auto-aim.

Getting big studios to change won't be easy, requiring more of a grassroots upswell first. "There's a lot of inertia to just go with the regular control scheme. We can just do whatever we want, so we went and did it," says Sam. "But if you're talking about Rockstar, that's gonna be a hard sell."

Despite decades of old habits crowding the hallway, Flick Stick has potential to become a standard control

method alongside mouse and analogue aim, and likely beginning with indie developers. For one, it's extremely easy to implement. It's also pretty much perfect on arrival. Dang! didn't implement Flick Stick into *Boomerang X* until very late into its development, when they were putting together the Nintendo Switch version of the game, and it only required a few tweaks to get working.

Most importantly, Flick Stick is very easy, if a little awkward, to learn. The biggest sticking point comes from learning to 'pause' the gyro. Since you don't want players literally spinning the controller in circles, Flick Stick's scheme dedicates a button to stopping the gyro so players can move the controller back to a default, comfortable position before making another series of movements. Suite tells me to think of it like lifting a mouse to reset it at the centre of your pad. It's weird, but I forgot I was doing it before long.

Ben Caulkins, another *Boomerang X* co-lead, isn't so certain about Flick Stick's future, but sees it as a viable standard accessibility option. "When we include a colour-blindness mode, that's not something I'm going to be able to appreciate. But there are a lot of people out there who are going to be able to appreciate it, and I look at Flick Stick in the same way."

Suite's a little sweeter on Flick Stick, but don't expect a major gamepad control revolution tomorrow. "It's like a Dvorak keyboard," he says. "I hope everybody suddenly buys a Dvorak keyboard. But yeah, I don't know if that's gonna happen." ■

James Davenport

**FLICK STICK IS
VERY EASY, IF A
LITTLE AWKWARD,
TO LEARN**

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

BIONIC MAN

Meet **TRENT OSTER**, the bloke who launched *Neverwinter Nights* twice

Back in the '90s, everybody told Bioware that the western RPG was dead. "That's the best news you can hear," cofounder Trent Oster laughs. "That means that there is absolutely nobody looking at your market space, and you can roll in and do fun things."

It also meant, however, that the studio was short on good examples to follow. Bioware's model for a great D&D game, *Pool of Radiance*, had come out in the late '80s and looked like Teletext. By 1995, the studio was instead playing *Warcraft*, the pioneering real-time strategy game. That's why, when you click on a *Baldur's Gate* party member, you often hear a funny, fourth-wall breaking quip in the style of early Blizzard – a "Yes, oh omnipresent authority figure?" or "Stop touching me!"

Warcraft is also why *Baldur's Gate* has real-time combat. After Bioware's game became a hit, almost all its competitors followed suit, and today *Warcraft's* influence on the RPG is so pervasive as to be invisible.

"*Warcraft* was held up on an altar," Oster says. "Worshipped for taking the concept of a multiplayer battle game and building the best possible interface you could do."

Ironically, by the time Bioware had finished *Baldur's Gate*, Oster hated its interface. He'd spent months testing the multiplayer component, and grown tired of all the thick, thunking buttons. "It was so much grey stone on the screen, and it was so many clicks," he says. "Unnecessary clicks build a rage in me that you cannot comprehend."

When Oster was handed *Neverwinter Nights* to direct, he immediately threw out all the grey stone in favour of a minimalist, MMO-style interface. Even the inventory was transparent. The benefit was clear, if you'll excuse the pun: players could always see an orc coming. But Bioware lost some of *Baldur's Gate's* weighty, earthen charm in the

process. "I called it the Bioware pendulum," Oster says. "We never made the same mistake twice. We made the polar opposite mistake. We'd do something equally atrocious in the opposite direction. It took a couple of games to learn moderation."

EVER WINTER

Oster stayed on until *Dragon Age: Origins*. Bioware might have swung back to *Baldur's Gate's* style and aesthetic, but its culture had fundamentally changed – from a "mom and pop shop" to a big company that ultimately answered to a private equity firm.

"Greg [Zeschuk] and Ray [Muzyka] kicked into overdrive mode trying to make their bosses happy," Oster recalls. "Under Electronic Arts, that just became even more prevalent. There were priorities that EA was giving Greg and Ray that weren't getting passed to the rest of the studio. As a result, it seemed to a lot of the senior people that we were making dumb decisions. Because we weren't seeing the entire picture of what was going on."

Oster left, and his first act as an independent was to buy an iPhone "because EA would provide phones, but they wouldn't provide smartphones". A year later, the iPad launched, and Oster's interface sense was tingling again. "My thought was, 'Wow, *Baldur's Gate* would be amazing on this. I wonder where *Baldur's Gate* is at?"

Over the ensuing decade, Oster has helmed the modernisation of Bioware's Infinity Engine – an effort which has ultimately given us enhanced editions of *Baldur's Gate*, *Icwind Dale*, and *Planescape: Torment* on Steam. Once done, Oster returned to *Neverwinter Nights* too. He was even able to fund the completion of *Darkness over Daggerford*, an official expansion campaign that was cancelled without warning by Atari back in 2006.

Many game developers decide that it's best not to look back on their previous games throughout their career. It's a wise coping strategy in an incredibly turbulent industry, where it's sadly common to lose years of work to cancelled or compromised projects. Oster, though, can't seem to pull himself away from the early games of his career.

"It's like an abusive relationship with *Neverwinter Nights*," he says. "I still love it, but every time I look at it, it hurts me. I see it for what I wanted to do, not for what it does. It's always missing something in my eyes. But when I see what the community's done with it, and what fans have been able to extend it to do, I can see past some of the shortfalls that drive me up the wall." ■

Jeremy Peel

HIGHER POWER

Three strange facts about Bioware's onetime majority shareholder, Elevation Partners

1 John Riccitiello was Bioware's boss, then acquired the studio when he became CEO of EA.

2 The company was named after the song Elevation, by the band U2. Hooo-ooo.

3 Bono was one of the partners. Which explains point 2, but raises many other questions.



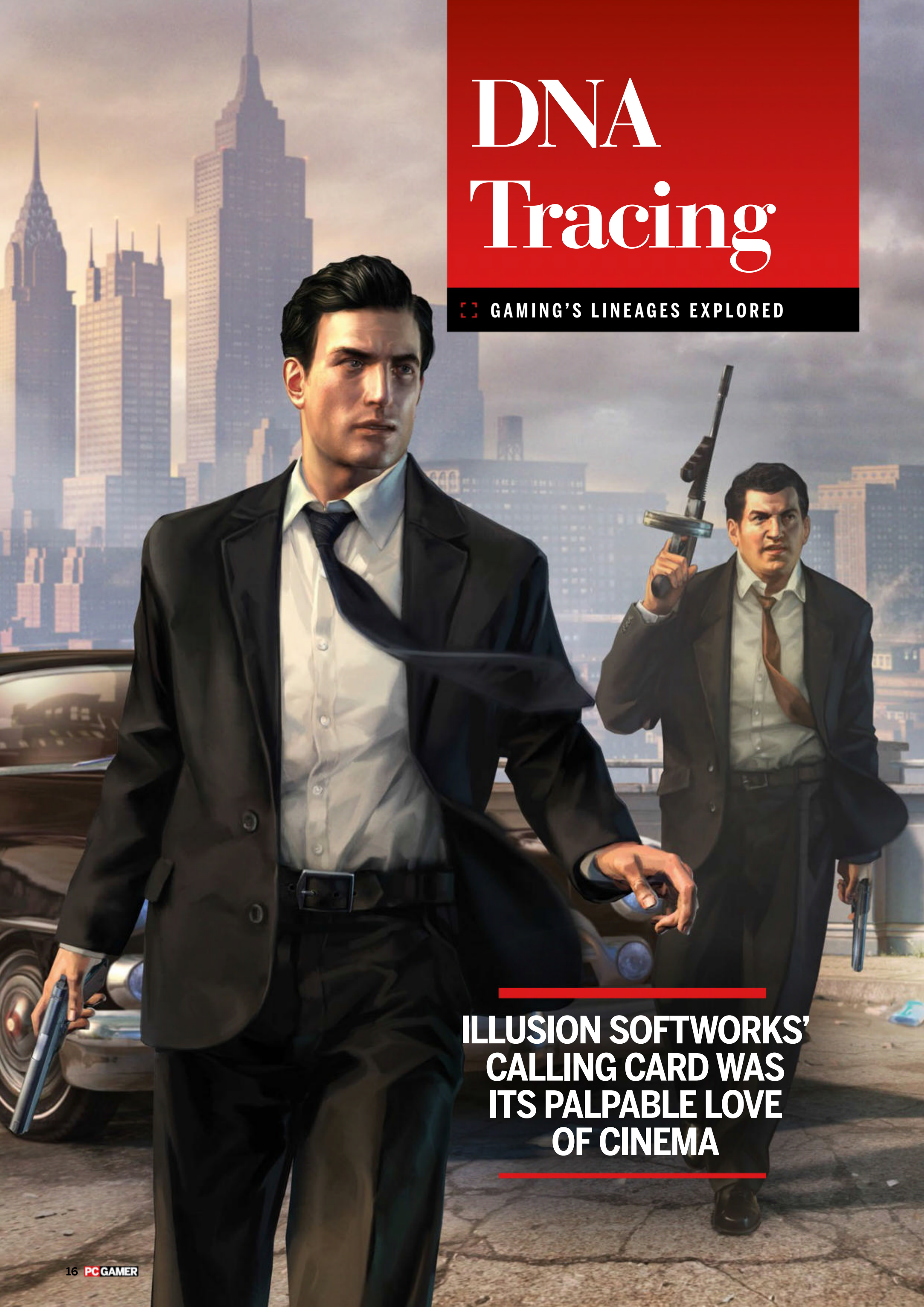
**“WE WEREN’T SEEING
THE ENTIRE PICTURE OF
WHAT WAS GOING ON”**



Neverwinter Nights' toolset still pumps out campaigns like it's 2002.



ABOVE: Oster's studio, Beamdog, enjoys friendly relations with D&D's publisher.



DNA Tracing

■ GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

**ILLUSION SOFTWARES'
CALLING CARD WAS
ITS PALPABLE LOVE
OF CINEMA**

THUGS IN SUITS

The rise, fall and redemption of *Mafia* developer **ILLUSION SOFTWARES**

For the typical PC gamer, military shooters are no more real than swords and sorcery; a safe way for grown-ups to play toy soldiers. But for the many young men who came of age in the Czech Republic's long period of compulsory service, military life wasn't just first-person fantasy – it was first-hand experience. Even today, Czech law requires all citizens between age 18 and 60 to be ready to take up arms, should their home be threatened by enemies.

It's perhaps no surprise, then, that the country became known for its tough and exacting combat simulations. In the west, Bohemia Interactive produced *Operation Flashpoint* – the starting point not just for *Arma* and *DayZ*, but the software now used to train the militaries of more than 60 countries. And to the east, in Brno, Illusion Softworks made *Hidden & Dangerous* – a WWII series about guiding a four-man SAS team through meticulously planned secret missions.

Like *Flashpoint*, *Hidden & Dangerous* could feel cruel to those who weren't cautious. Players learned there's only one thing more painful than seeing your sniper shot dead by an unseen assailant: seeing your second, investigating soldier shot dead by the same unseen assailant.

It was also finicky in the extreme. Control binding was a mission in itself, an orienteering trip that sent you outward to undusted corners of the keyboard, ending inevitably and desperately at the tilde key. The complexity of its inventory management, meanwhile, was rivalled only by *Baldur's Gate* at the time. This was a series that asked you to weigh up, quite literally, the importance of a first aid kit or extra ammo for your M1 Garand – knowing your commando couldn't carry both while making an expeditious retreat.

GARAND PLANS

Yet those who found satisfaction in planning and slow, judicious navigation truly did feel dangerous as they crept through the cosses of Illusion Softworks' European countryside. There was unmatched tension to be found in lying on your belly in snow, scanning the treeline for motion amid the blue-grey blur of a blizzard. Or stuffing your inventory with clothes filched from your enemies, and donning them as disguise during a base infiltration.

What turned out to be Illusion Softworks' calling card, though, was its palpable love of cinema. The studio had a knack for capturing the clichés of Sunday afternoon black-and-white dad telly – the mission briefings delivered in Received Pronunciation, and stiff-lipped British officers who used 'chaps' as a catch-all codename in radio communication. *Hidden & Dangerous 2*'s campaign even boasted a fantastic Spielberg-esque score, which seemed to mimic the flutters and thuds of a stressed heart. Illusion clearly relished the period setting – history filtered through the romantic lens of Classical Hollywood – and carried that approach forward to its defining series: *Mafia*.

LITTLE ITALY

It's easy to forget now, in an era when action games are tapped for HBO adaptations, that the genre once eschewed prestige drama. Whether through sheer love of b-movies, or an inferiority complex that infected the entire medium, game writers actively chased the lowbrow – producing



ABOVE: Sippin' whisky out the bottle, Kid Rock style.



LEFT: You'll have to empty your pockets of guns and knives before picking up all that.

ROAD WORKS

The evolving cars of Mafia's timeline



1927 THE BOLT ACE

A tribute to the Ford Model T, the first ever mass-produced car. Flimsy, like an ornate pram. No need to worry about the speed limit – you'll never hit it.



1930 THE FALCONER

Driven as a taxi throughout the city of Lost Heaven, its sheer heft makes it an ideal choice for car chases, and the inevitable collisions that follow.



1938 THE WRIGHT

This is capable of reaching 95mph – a speed unfathomable just a few years earlier. Available in green, blue, and if you don't brake soon enough, red.



» protagonists who were, by design, broad shouldered one-liner dispensers.

It was a habit that left the very pinnacle of cinema wide open for a group of Czech developers to colonise. Illusion aped the tone and themes of Scorsese and Coppola, tracing a familiar arc from postwar poverty to respect and riches, and the ultimate realisation that there's no clean retirement from a career in organised crime.

Yes, the *Mafia* games were powered by solemn lessons: that suits don't make murderers civilised, and that 'family' is a fiction mobsters will dispose of when it suits them. But the journey there was smoothed by fan-favourite characters like Sam and Paulie, who sat in the passenger seats and bantered like school kids.

It all worked, but only because Illusion took the time to ground its stories. By spending a couple of missions taking taxi fares as Tommy, or stacking boxes at the docks as Vito, you well understood why these young men itched for glamour and excitement – even if it came at a Faustian cost.

After setting out to develop a *Driver*-style city – one haunted by cops brandishing speeding tickets – Illusion had the restraint to use its open world as an elaborate backdrop for storytelling, rather than rinse it for shallow distractions. But *Mafia*'s slow burn, its greatest source of strength, often proved divisive among players raised in Liberty City. *GTA*'s world never slept, so why should *Mafia* players have to do chores to get to the action? Eurogamer dubbed *Mafia II* “a hell of boredom”, and analysts speculated that its several-year development costs wouldn't be recouped.

WHACKED

Once the sequel launched, Illusion seemed to waver in its own long-held convictions. *Mafia II*'s DLC jettisoned careful plotting in favour of point-chasing car chases and shootouts – asking players to clear the map of mission



icons, *GTA* style. If these experiments reflected a studio in philosophical turmoil, however, those questions were never resolved. After three years of false starts on *Mafia III*, publisher 2K lost patience, relocating the project to the US. Illusion was effectively killed in the process. While some

staff relocated, others were laid off, and the Brno office was reduced to a support function it still retains – albeit under the banner of new *Mafia III* developer Hangar 13.

If there's any consolation, it's to be found in the knowledge that Illusion staff remain near the heart of *Mafia*. It was Hangar 13's veteran Czech contingent that pitched *Mafia*:

Definitive Edition, a sumptuous remake

of the original game that holds true to its story and spirit, while showing off tech first built in Brno. Like its very first gangster protagonist, Illusion wasn't allowed to get out alive – but it was granted a legacy. ■

Jeremy Peel

ABOVE: No amount of camouflage can conceal a face that large.

BELOW: Waiting in a mob restaurant isn't worth the hazard pay.

AFTER THREE YEARS OF FALSE STARTS ON MAFIA III, PUBLISHER 2K LOST PATIENCE





Alliance of the Sacred Suns

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Kathawk StudiosPUBLISHER
Hooded HorseLINK
bit.ly/3fIUhSLALLIANCE OF THE
SACRED SUNSDune meets *Crusader Kings* in
this ambitious strategy game

Emperor Gary Spacetimes is in a heap of trouble. Not only has he inherited the Imperial Space Throne at the tender age of 18, but soothsayers across the galaxy are predicting civilisational collapse within the next 20 years, as resources grow scarce and planetary populations reach breaking point. Gary's only hope is to reunite the six great houses.

Such is the premise of *Alliance of the Sacred Suns*, which is what you'd get if you crossed the novel *Dune* with *Crusader Kings* and then beat the resulting hybrid to death with a kaleidoscope. It's a game with grand ambitions, but a few of its design decisions left me a little concerned for the final product.

While *Crusader Kings* is the most obvious comparison point for *Alliance*, there are a few major differences between the two games. For starters, *Alliance* is turn-based rather than real-time, which means the game has a very different flow compared to Paradox Interactive's grand strategy. More importantly, there's no dynastic element to *Alliance* and no choices regarding the role you play in its universe.

A game of *Alliance* starts off with you creating said Emperor. You give them a name, choose a portrait to represent them, and assign a House tradition, which determines your prowess in areas such as farming, academia, and energy production. The game then proceeds to an overhead view of a galaxy map, split into several constellations somewhat

confusingly known as provinces. Each province comprises multiple star systems, which in turn contain various planets ranging from lifeless ice-balls all the way up to resource-abundant Super Earths.

SUN WORSHIPPERS

Initially, you'll only control one or two planets directly – known as your holdings. While you can acquire more, and it can be prudent to do so, that isn't really the point of *Alliance*. Your objective is the integrity of the Empire as a whole, achieving which requires a more nuanced approach than making land grabs for personal gain.

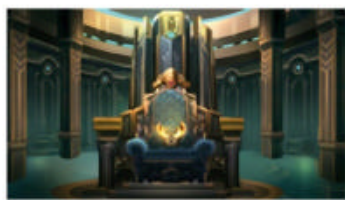
Successfully managing and expanding your empire involves a delicate mixture of diplomacy, intrigue, economics, and military might. Moreover, you must take care in what you choose to prioritise. You only receive a handful of action points per turn, and it's frighteningly easy to burn through them. On the second turn of Gary Spacetimes' reign, I was bombarded with calls for attention by various figures throughout the empire. I naively tried to heed all these calls, not realising that simply reading some of these notes costs an action point. By the time I'd finished, I'd burned through all my AP, leaving me unable to enact any of my plans for the turn.

Although this was annoying, it taught me the first rule of running an Empire: learn who to ignore. There will always be more problems than you can effectively deal with, so you need to focus on what needs to be done, what can be most realistically achieved, and what will best benefit both you and the Empire.

To that end, one of your most important goals is surveying the political landscape between you and the other Great Houses. Your relationships with the various houses don't start off equal. Some will be friendly or indifferent toward you, while others will have vendettas or may have even sworn vengeance against you.

The reasons for behind these vendettas are not made clear by *Alliance*, which is a shame, but it also doesn't matter. The point is they don't like you, which will affect your approach to uniting them. Friendlier houses can be brought into the fold with compliments, support for their projects, and the occasional bribe. These House Heads can then be

PLAYED
ITIT TAUGHT ME THE FIRST
RULE OF RUNNING AN EMPIRE:
LEARN WHO TO IGNORE

Alliance of the Sacred Suns

» stuffed into the Galactic Council, where they can influence votes on issues such as whether to cap domestic spending, or whether to curtail the Emperor's power.

HOUSE PARTY

Like *Crusader Kings*, *Alliance* has an entire system dedicated to subterfuge, which revolves around characters known as Inquisitors. These spies can be dispatched into rival houses to covertly monitor their activity or perform heavier handed actions such as assassinations. Alternatively, Inquisitors can be used to unravel the plots and schemes of other houses, the information from which can be used to have conspirators arrested, thereby removing them from the power structure.

But the most effective way to influence houses of all stripes is simply giving them things to do. Expanding the Empire is achieved through Projects, which include scouting new systems, colonising planets, and building new infrastructure like trading hubs. Each Project is overseen by a project leader of your choosing, and is supported by three Contributors who excel in a relevant field of expertise. Completing Projects increases the Power of both the Emperor and those who partook in its completion. Consequently, all Houses want to be selected to do the Empire's good work, and will be more amenable to you if they're included.

I like this side of *Alliance*, the way it attempts to simulate the burden of duty that comes with power, all the wearisome games you have to play to massage bruised egos and channel the ambition of rivals so that it's useful without being a threat. Alongside the more dynamic political wrangling, most turns commence with a bespoke, *Crusader Kings*-style event that helps define your leader's character. It could be as simple as imagining what kind of leader you'd like to be, or it could be more specific, such as how to respond to a colony that has suddenly cut off all communication.

REBEL ALLIANCE

At times, *Alliance* made me feel like Duke Leto Atreides, shouldered with a responsibility that I didn't want, forced to deal amicably with people who quite

clearly want me dead. But *Alliance* also made me feel like Leto Atreides in another way, that the game itself was actively conspiring against me, being wilfully obtuse and withholding information for reasons beyond my comprehension.

I simply could not figure out, for example, how I was supposed to effectively manage my economy. I understood the broad goal, which is to increase your Gross Empire Product (GEP) to support your annual budget. The actual mechanics of increasing your GEP, however, were completely beyond me.

It's entirely possible that this is my fault, and that I simply overlooked an important button or tooltip. But *Alliance*'s UI design is not much help in this regard. It's worth noting *Alliance* isn't the prettiest looking grand strategy around. The planets look nice, but the character portraits are stunningly ugly. The biggest eyesore, however is the UI, an assault of clashing colours and wildly varying font sizes that makes it extremely hard to parse the information it displays.

Moreover, the demo build of *Alliance* would generously be described as roughshod. The UI is littered with placeholder text. Many buttons simply don't work, such as the Exploit button on planets. There's a noticeable stutter whenever you switch between galaxy layers or UI screens, which makes the whole experience feel rather sticky. Oh, and the save system doesn't seem to work either, which meant I had to keep the game running or risk losing all my progress. Bit of a nightmare.

Again, let me stress that it's only a demo of a beta build, and not necessarily representative of the final product. Nonetheless, I'm concerned that *Alliance* risks suffering from a lack of focus. The concept of placing you in the role of a specific ruler at a time of crisis is an interesting one, and I like the way *Alliance* tries to simulate the distance between you as Emperor and your subjects. But I'm not sure how well this stacks with becoming mired in the construction of individual trading hubs for individual planets, or having three different types of scouting mission when exploring new worlds. I understand that grand strategy games tend toward the complex. But complexity does not equate to greatness, and I fear that *Alliance of the Sacred Suns* may be undone by sweating the unnecessary details that Gary Spacetimes so quickly learned to avoid.

Rick Lane



Being rebuffed by a subject can damage your reputation.



THE DEMO BUILD OF ALLIANCE WOULD GENEROUSLY BE DESCRIBED AS ROUGHSHOD

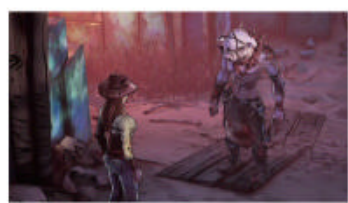


ABOVE: How would you like your planet scanned? Rare, medium, or well-done?

LEFT: The depth of *Alliance* can be quite intimidating.

PREVIEW

Weird West



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn

DEVELOPER
WolfEye Studio

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
weirdwest.com

WEIRD WEST

A new perspective on immersive sims

What convinced me *Weird West* is a true immersive sim had nothing to do with the carefully prepared talking points from a recent 30-minute hands-off demo. It was a small dust devil, a random weather event, whipping through the scene.

While former Arkane founder Raphael Colantonio explains the finesse of the physics system, showing off by tossing a bottle and shooting it out of the air, a better, if less elegant example comes along.

The dust devil skirts around the edge of our bird's-eye view of a destitute barn and gunslinger protagonist, first picking up some wooden debris, then passing over a campfire. It then transforms into a raging cyclone of flame and despair, a swirling monstrosity carrying a dozen flaming planks which then light the adjacent farmhouse ablaze and send our demoist scrambling out of the way.

Where a bigger team might run into production roadblocks, WolfEye Studio's smaller team, largely made up of former Arkane talent, and zoomed out perspective allows for higher concept experimentation. For instance, in *Weird West*, you don't play one character, you play five of them. Each chapter features a new protagonist with a unique story that permanently affects the world state for the next one, until they all converge into a final chapter together.

Weird West's expressive verbs are its most exciting features though, unique to

this perspective. Players can pick up and throw just about any object. There's a dedicated kick button, and your kicks do not discriminate – they'll hurt friend or foe, chicken or cow. Players can also climb around the scenery, stacking barrels to climb fences and general stores, leaping between rooftops and snooping through people's homes. But as Raph demonstrated, you can also just make your own fun, shooting bottles out of the air or kicking some empty cans around.

WEST WORLD

We see fragments of how it fits into action throughout the demo. Raph's gunslinger does a *Max Payne*-style dive between rooftops. From above, he sneaks around some enemies and kicks a barrel towards them, shooting and igniting it as it makes contact. He climbs a fence into enemy headquarters and uses some rope he finds to climb into a well to find an alternate route in. It's about as immersive sim as immersive sims get, but with more tornadoes and an odd wrapper.

Much like *Fallout 2*, you move through *Weird West* via a world map obscured in fog that lifts as you chart your way across it. Physical spaces are discrete, but embarking on journeys between them run a chance of triggering a random encounter, be it a coyote attack or an invitation to a coven's bloody ritual. Raph takes down a few coyotes, then looks for treasure. Shovels are another important systemic tool in *Weird West*: you can dig your way out of tricky situations and bury anything, including your dead friends and family.

We'll get perks in relics and a ton of skills to choose from that build out all sorts of playstyles between characters, but I'm curious to see how it feels and what kind of unique combat and stealth encounters the isometric perspective provides. With *Prey* fresh in my mind, I have more reasons to believe WolfEye will pull it off than not.

Weird West might be a different looking game for a team composed of developers aimed at acclaimed first-person immersive sims in the past, but it just might equal them. *Weird West* looks to be as complex an immersive sim as the best of them. It's out later this year.

James Davenport



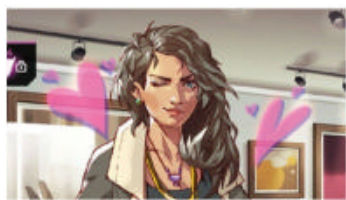
Colour your character however you like.

WE'LL GET PERKS IN RELICS AND A TON OF SKILLS TO CHOOSE FROM



ABOVE: What church looked like back when.

LEFT: The 'death from above' approach.

Boyfriend Dungeon

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Kitfox GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
boyfrienddungeon.comBOYFRIEND
DUNGEONA dating sim where you romance
deadly weapons

Dating sims are weird. I've courted pigeons, wholesome fathers, monster prom hopefuls, '90s velociraptors, sacrificial goats, Colonel Sanders, and now, thanks to Kitfox Games, I can date hot people that can transform into deadly weapons. What a world we live in.

Boyfriend Dungeon combines dating sim mechanics with hack-n-slash dungeon crawling, the idea being you meet human hotties and then use their transformational powers to fight monsters. The game's title focuses on boyfriends, but you can also date women and non-binary folk if you prefer. You also pick your own pronouns, making for a super-inclusive take on the genre, which is what we like to see. The only thing that stays the same across all games is your character being a big ball of dating anxiety. Hopefully, a few outings with some sword people should sort that out.

After creating my character, I arrive in Verona Beach and am met by Jesse, my cousin who I apparently haven't seen in ten years. After a few pleasantries he cuts to the chase and says he's already set me up with a sword friend of his called Issac, a business professional with a passion for duelling. He says it's totally not a date but just a super casual 'combat lesson' to show me the ropes of dungeon crawling. Sure Jesse, whatever you say.

Jesse described Issac as 'straight-edged' and he wasn't joking. When I meet

him, he's in weapon form, an épée with a long, thin blade with a sharp tip. The combat, though is not as sharp as I'd hoped. It's functional enough, but dodging and attacking feels a little clunky. Isaac's attacks focus on being light on your feet and keeping distance from the enemy, but I'm someone who likes to get right into the thick of combat. Maybe there's a hot broadsword somewhere in this town?

GREED DATING

The dungeon we're in is an abandoned mall and all the monsters take the shape of your deepest psychological fears. My character is apparently scared of intimacy through technology, so the mall is filled with snapping flip phones and floating television sets. Seems a little weird but I don't question it – it's the least strange thing in a game where I'm trying to romance swords.

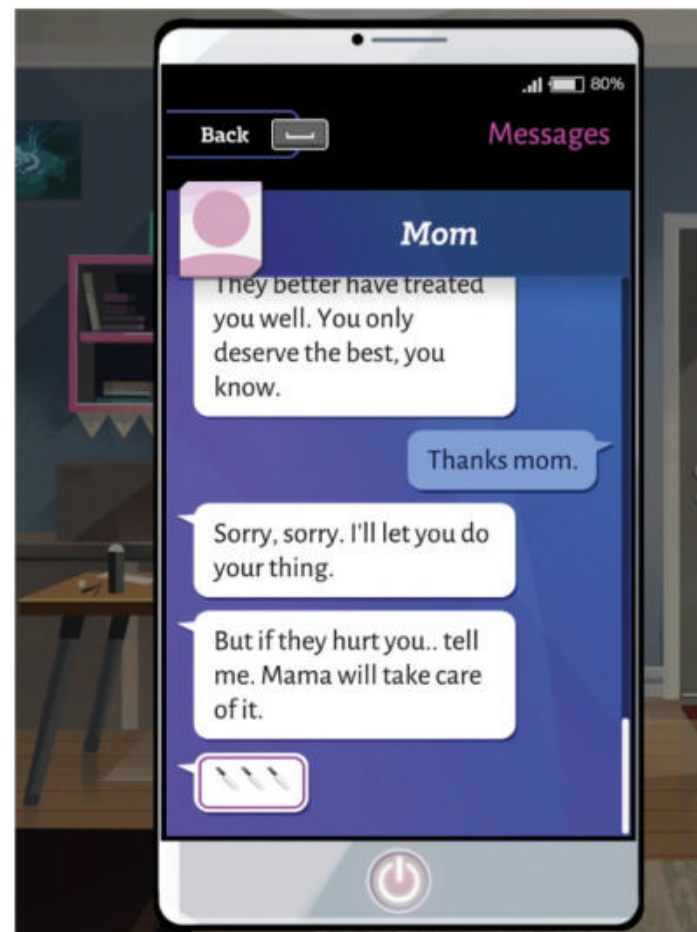
We're not in the dungeon for long when we meet another sword: a sharp, curved blade called Sunder, who's unfortunately trapped in a chained box. We release him and he transforms back into his human form: a shirtless man with long, tousled brown hair that makes it look like he's constantly in front of a wind machine.

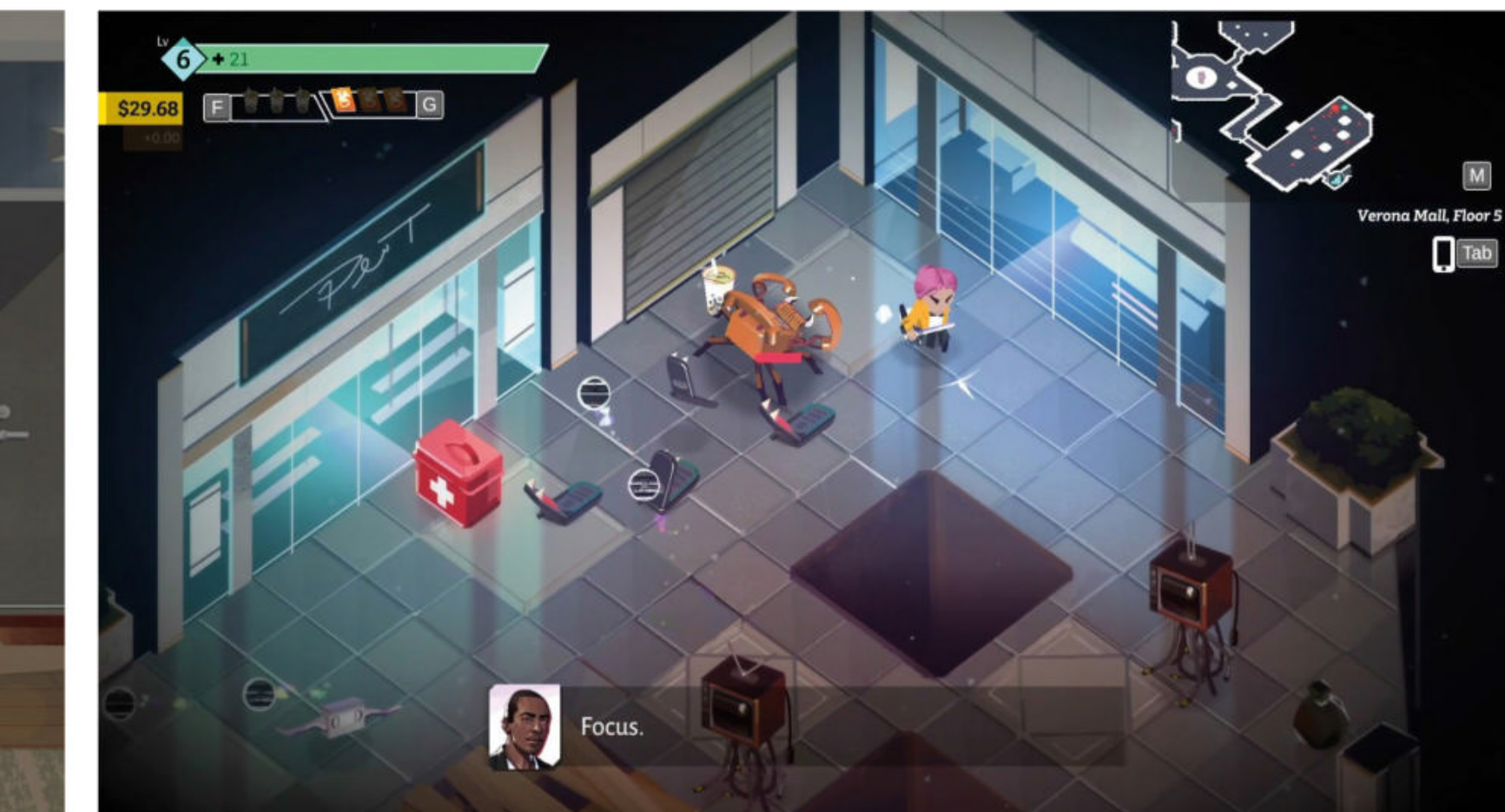
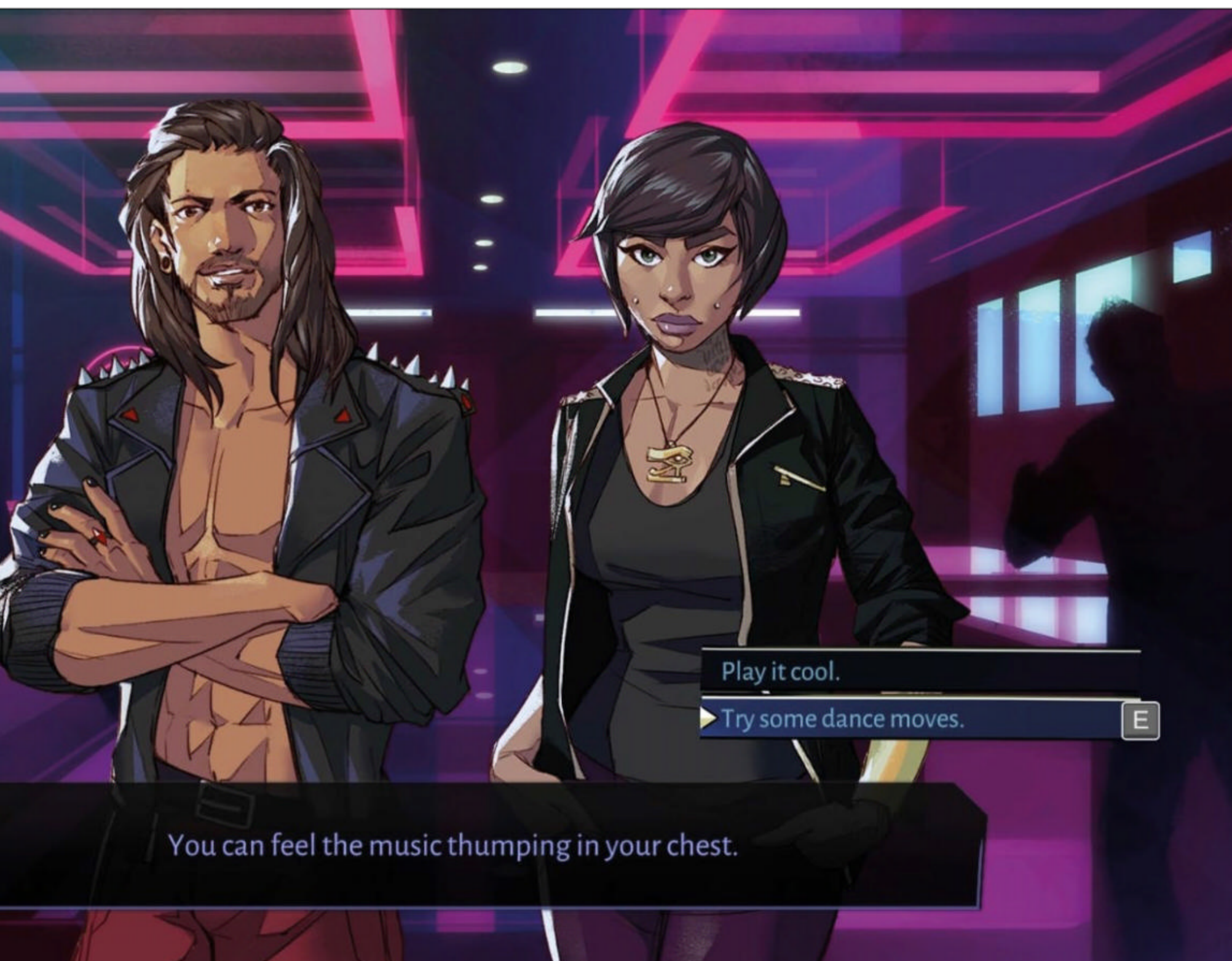
After getting my butt kicked in the dungeon, I'm taken back to my apartment. I've not even been awake for a minute before my phone blows up; Jesse is desperate to know how the 'not date' went, Issac wants to organise another training session, Sunder is asking me to drop by his club, and my mum demands an update on my love life, only a day after arriving here. Can't a girl catch a break?

Meeting up with characters and going on dates is important for levelling up each weapon's 'love rank', letting you unlock more abilities. So far, I've only met a small handful of the plenty of other characters in town – one of which is Pocket the cat, who can turn into a pair of brass knuckles.

Although I wish the combat sections weren't such a chore, my first two hours with *Boyfriend Dungeon* have been fun. I'm definitely leaning more towards Valeria as my one true hottie, although it is hard to resist the lure of a feline that makes me better at punching.

Rachel Watts

THE LEAST STRANGE THING IN
A GAME WHERE I'M TRYING TO
ROMANCE SWORDS



ABOVE: Time to win this sword's heart and bust some moves.

LEFT: You've not known fear until you've been chased by a giant crabby rotary phone.

FAR LEFT: When your mum uses the dagger emoji you know she means it.

Dredge



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early 2022

DEVELOPER
Black Salt Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
blacksaltgames.com

DREDGE

Lovecraftian fishing game puts squid back on the menu

When the sun is high and the fish are biting, *Dredge* could almost pass as any other fishing game. With seagulls wheeling overhead and your simple vessel bobbing back and forth between picturesque island communities, there's something very relaxing about life on the high seas.

But when the sun sets, whatever wholesome vibes *Dredge* might have given off are immediately replaced by something much more sinister. As the fog rolls in, the picture-perfect bays and harbours become treacherous mazes filled with jagged rocks. The toll of being alone on the open water starts to weigh on your mind, and the mackerel and cod beneath the waves seem to be replaced with something much more dangerous.

Whatever's out there seems to have left its mark on the population, whose haggard faces stare back at you as they complain of their fatigue. Ask a few questions, and you'll find that their problems run a little deeper than their aching joints. Shipwrecks litter the coastlines as reminders of loss, failure and whatever might be lurking in the deep.

The sinister nature of these encounters bleeds into your day job. As the mystery of the islands begins to unfold, you're never sure what your line might snag next. The first chapter provides more questions than answers, but seems to sow the seeds of some classic psychological horror to come.

Ali Jones

THE TOLL OF BEING ALONE ON THE OPEN WATER STARTS TO WEIGH ON YOUR MIND

1 The whole fishing process takes time, whether it's securing a catch, moving your boat, or fitting new parts. The islands get a lot more dangerous when the sky gets dark, so you'll have to keep an eye on the clock to ensure you make it home with your sanity intact.

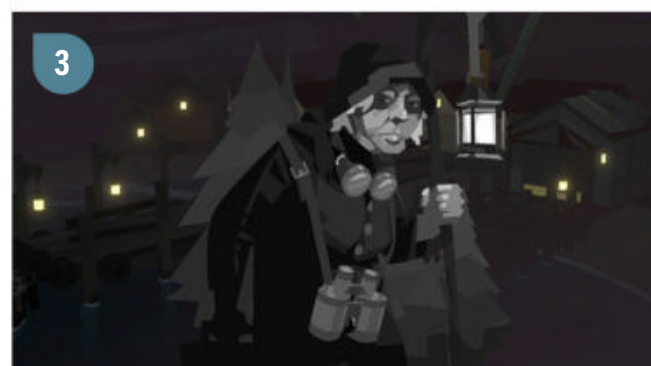
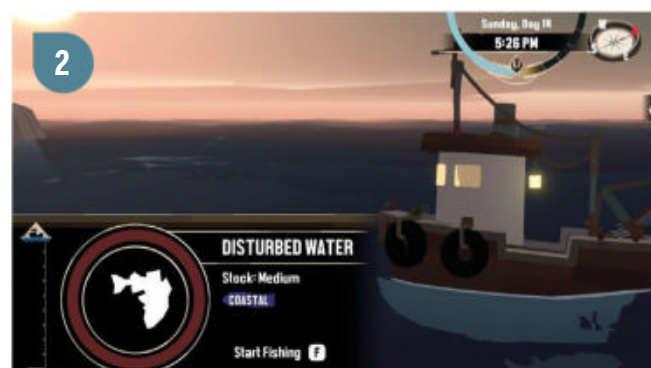
2 Fish you catch will be reeled in over time, with a few tugs speeding up the process. Once they're on board, you'll need to find some space. But over-fish a spot, and it'll be depleted, meaning you'll need to head out to deeper water if you want to find more.

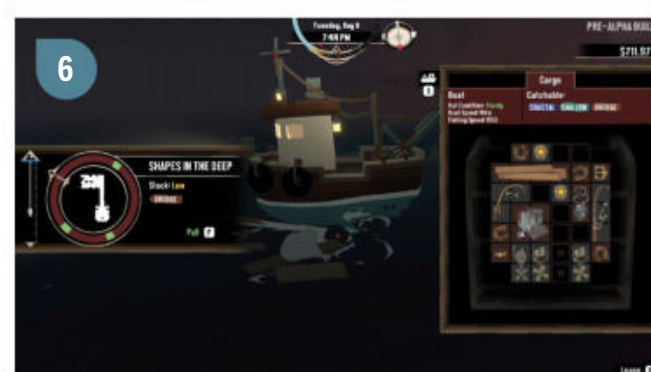
3 The people of Greater Marrow seem to be hiding something, and only a select few offer information on the town's past. However, someone might let something slip, an indecipherable language hinting at something monstrous beneath the waves.

4 As the sun goes down, darkness and fog makes navigation almost impossible, but damaging your hull on a rock is a relatively minor concern in the face of the monstrous creatures that begin to surface if you let your deep-sea isolation get to you.

5 The Shipyard lets you upgrade your boat; improved motors let you cover more ground in a single day; new rods let you fish in the shallows or the depths; and a few extra lights will help you hold back the darkness if you find yourself way out at sea when the sun goes down.

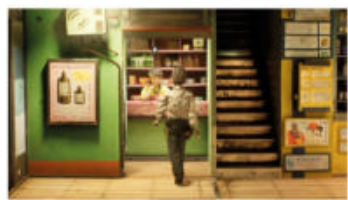
6 Dredging up sunken treasure from the shipwrecks that mark almost every shoreline is a way to make some quick cash, but there's more than rusted old trinkets down there, and it's clear that the mysterious and outcast Collector is looking for something very specific.





PREVIEW

Harold Halibut



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Slow Bros

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
slow-bros.com/harold-halibut

HAROLD HALIBUT

A beautiful stop-motion game ten years in the making

If you were to fling the last humans to a distant planet and raise them on a spaceship for 250 years, you'd end up with some weirdos. *Harold Halibut* is about just such a group, and turns out that humanity's last hopes are indeed a quirky bunch.

Mr Halibut himself is one such resident of this city. He's the ship's handyman and lab assistant to lead scientist, Jeanne Mareaux, who is trying to find a way to get humanity's metropolis unstuck and back into space. Turns out after leaving Earth the space vessel's residents hoped they would find another planet, but accidentally crash-landed, leaving everyone trapped underneath the waves of an alien world. Not that they seem to care much – many of the inhabitants have found peace with their underwater life.

It's a sci-fi adventure that developer Slow Bros says tackles the topics of love, family, grief, and relationships. But *Harold Halibut*'s main attraction is that the game looks gorgeous. Its story is told completely through stop-motion visuals, and the graphics have taken the team a long time to perfect.

"Almost ten years," Slow Bros' game director Onat Hekimoglu says. "Counting initial idea gathering, years of experimental technology development next to school and other jobs, setting up a company and a lot more. We're excited to provide a really dense worldbuilding setup that lets your curiosity guide you."

THERE'S BUDDY THE POSTMAN WHO HAS BEEFY CALVES AND RUNS EVERYWHERE

RAPTUROUS

That's exactly what I do as I play through the game's first chapter. The preview is light on story and instead lets you explore the submerged city. It's incredible knowing that everything has been physically made. The delicate facial features of the character models, every handcrafted item on the general store's shelf, the wooden floorboards, rusty pipes, knitted jumpers – there are hundreds of tiny details.

"Fabian Preuschoff, the set architect, would build the set at a 1:10 scale from materials ranging from children's clay to welded metal or aged wood," Hekimoglu says. "Then it would be painted, 'aged' via chemicals that create rust and other patinas, then add the details like dirt/dust smeared on the wall."

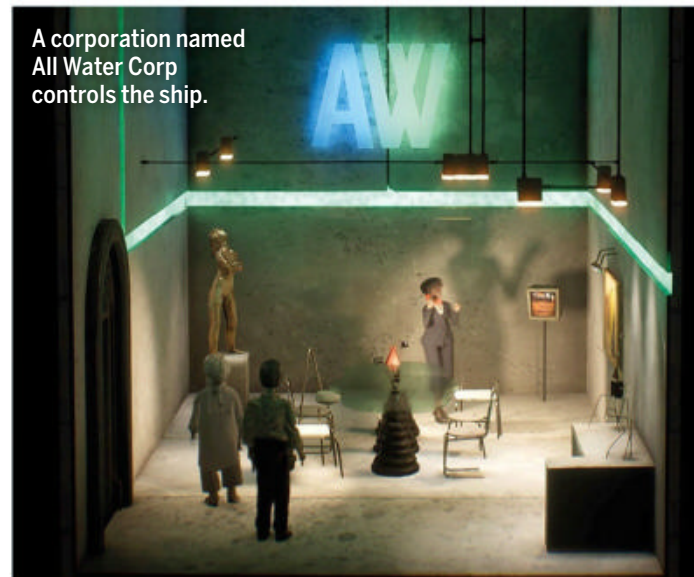
If you look carefully, you can see the painterly brush strokes on faded posters and store signs, and even the tiles on the arcade floor look like someone has cut out hundreds of tiny vinyl squares. One character wears a tiny, well-worn knitted jumper with a smiley face sewn in.

Exploring the ship, you get introduced to many of its inhabitants. There's Buddy the postman who has beefy calves and runs everywhere, insisting he keeps his promise of same-day delivery. The general store owner, Tommy, believes that his wife has lost interest in him and so in an attempt to win her back, builds a neon sign above his store declaring his love for her. My favourite is the shop owner of a clothing store whose sheer excitement for selling winter wear on a spaceship with zero climate is remarkable.

"The people living on this ship are supposed to represent a cross-section of what it might be like to isolate a human population for a long time," Hekimoglu says. "We tried to balance Earthly contemporary conventions and an amplified 'game of telephone' version of conventions from the past." I love the idea that the last of humanity ended up getting everything not quite right.

Harold Halibut's Steam page says it's "coming soon" although I'm pretty sure Slow Bros has kept it that way for the past several years. Let's hope that we'll get to play it sooner rather than later.

Rachel Watts

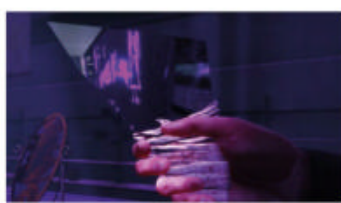


A corporation named All Water Corp controls the ship.



ABOVE: There are ten Mr Secretaries, all brothers, all identical.

LEFT: The spaceship's control base is the most impressive set.

In Sound Mind

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

September 28, 2021

DEVELOPER

We Create Stuff

PUBLISHER

Modus Games

LINK

modusgames.com

IN SOUND MIND

Experimental horror that harks back to the Source era

Lately, something has been stirring in the murky periphery of the horror genre. Recent games like *Amnesia: Rebirth*, *The Medium*, and *Chernobylite* use horror framing and ambience to serve the story rather than just startle the player – they're haunting rather than horrifying, unsettling rather than jumpy. *In Sound Mind* looks set to join this club.

Here you play a psychiatrist figuring out why various patients of his ended up killing themselves following their treatment.

But this isn't just a case of looking through old session notes and drug prescriptions. When you listen to a patient interview tape, your office shakes, and you exit the door into a nightmarish recreation of the area where that patient perished.

In the preview build, I explored an abandoned supermarket haunted by a 'self-conscious' spirit. Later, I wandered a cloud-enshrouded coastline, avoiding the blood-red beam of a lighthouse and running away from what can loosely be described as a tar monster. Both areas were sizeable, inviting me to explore them for interesting story tidbits or pills to boost one of my four attributes – health, stamina, speed, and stealth.

Both areas had their unique dangers too, with solid puzzles and resident bosses for you to banish. There is some direct combat; strange shadowmen with cycloptic neon-spotlight eyes pop up to patrol corridors, but they feel a little incongruous with the overall tone. The

SHADOWMEN WITH CYCLOPTIC NEON-SPOTLIGHT EYES POP UP TO PATROL CORRIDORS

main focus is around puzzle-solving, opening up new areas, and working out how to banish each area's vengeful spirit.

In Sound Mind looks and feels uncannily like an early Source engine game, which makes sense when you consider that the developer cut their teeth making legendary *Half-life 2* mod, *Nightmare House 2*. You move extremely fast, and the world geometry has those sharp clean angles I associate with City 17. As someone with fond memories of that era, this style tickles my nostalgia sensors.

In between chapters, you unlock different parts of the apartment complex where you live, finding items like gas masks and glass shards to access new areas while avoiding (or fighting) those strange shadow creatures. While using a glass shard to smash wooden planks and cut through police tape that you could just walk through is a little logically tenuous, I had a great time interconnecting and expanding the explorable space of the hub area in that 'Metroidvania-lite' way.

DON'T LOOK NOW

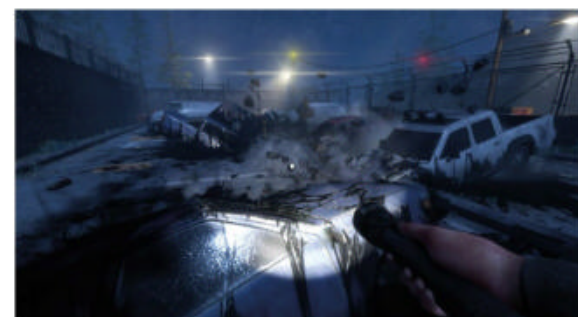
In Sound Mind eschews simplistic jump-scares for a more uncanny-valley, sometimes even magical, style of horror. Mannequins move when you're not looking to help you out of sticky situations, a bastardly man keeps mocking you on the phone while choking on his own laughter, and at one point you go through a sparkling blue tunnel to emerge into a maze filled with letter blocks and children's toys.

The dark twist on the Americana locations I've seen so far also give it hints of Stephen King or David Lynch, and I'd hope that subsequent chapters continue to explore these spaces with the same detail and variety as the first two.

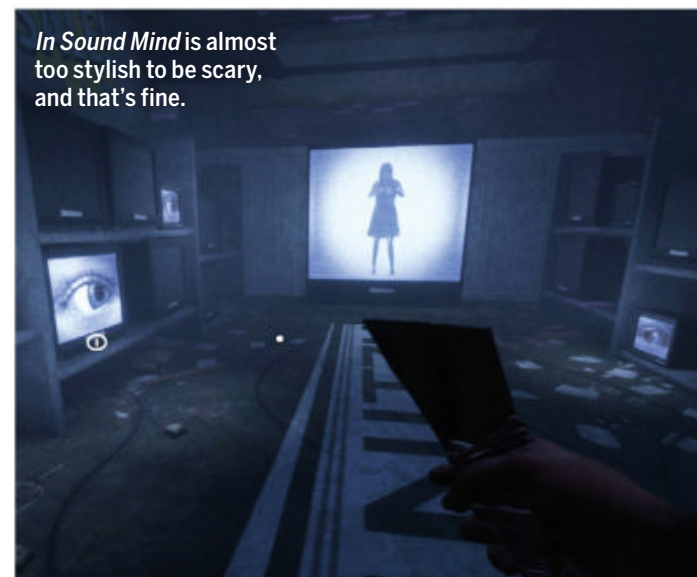
Oh, and there's a talking cat who's helping you figure out what's going on without losing your mind (assuming that talking to a cat isn't a clear sign that the mind in question is already lost).

In Sound Mind manages to feel interesting and experimental while being rooted in the rarely-revisited golden era of *Half-life 2* modding. I want to burrow deeper into its troubled hero's mind so that I can continue exploring its warrens of psychedelic, magical horror.

Robert Zak



In Sound Mind is almost too stylish to be scary, and that's fine.

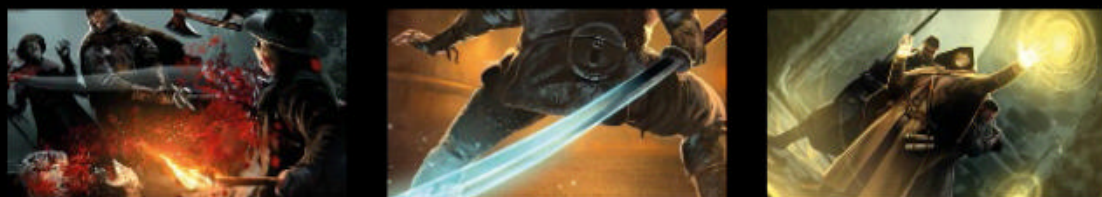




ABOVE: Each setting has its own flavour, like this coastal town with the lighthouse death ray.

LEFT: The aesthetic and feel of *In Sound Mind* hark back to Source engine games.

Deepest Chamber



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£10.30

DEVELOPER
Balcony Softworks

PUBLISHER
Those Awesome Guys

LINK
deepestchamber.com

DEEPEST CHAMBER

Dead good deckbuilding in a *Dark Souls*-esque world

If you never 'got gud' at *Dark Souls*, and you've been wondering what all the fuss was about, you can get the gist, sort of, with this very *Souls*-inspired roguelike deckbuilder, out now in early access. *Deepest Chamber* is set in an own-brand version of Lordran, home to beaky plague doctors, hatchet-wielding midwives, and other undead weirdos.

The game takes place in a fantasy city, which is simultaneously stuck under a magical energy dome, and beset by a familiar undead curse. As a result, the surviving residents have retreated to the sewers. Playing as a band of adventurers you'll descend into the bowels of the city, fighting turn-based battles across a handful of floors. Along the way you'll unlock new cards and enemies, gradually expanding the game, at least mechanically. In this Early Access build there is only one area, the sewers, to explore.

While I'll happily splosh round a sewer in games, it was hardly the most notable area in *Dark Souls*, so it's a shame this effluent cavern is our sole backdrop. We can expect two further subterranean areas in the finished game, along with additional enemies, cards, and trinkets.

Deepest Chamber's structure is a little unusual, in that it's split into Salvage and Quest runs, which each offer different rewards for a run completion. Salvage runs will let you keep a card and trinket in your back pocket for the next Quest run, while Quest runs dole out new stuff when

you meet achievement-style objectives. And there's a lot of stuff to unlock, including more challenging difficulty levels. I found it surprisingly doable to rinse the sewer on the default.

You might consequently get your fill of *Deepest Chamber* in short order, if you play the game as it stands now. Everyone has their limit for trudging round samey sewer levels, no matter how considered and compelling the card-based combat.

DARK DEALS

Oh yes, I should probably mention that. It's *Slay the Spire*, but with a few key differences, most notably in the way that blocking works. In both games you apply Block points, which will absorb a specific amount of enemy damage. However, *Deepest Chamber* lets you retain some Block for subsequent turns. It's a change that's been carefully implemented, adding new ways to plan ahead during battles.

Slay the Spire is also a pretty deterministic game: you know exactly how much damage enemies will cause, and how much you're about to deal in return.

Deepest Chamber introduces a tad more randomness to the formula, by leaving many damage values in the hands of the gods. For example, your fireball card will take 5-8 health from the enemy, and five might not be enough to kill them. It's a seemingly small change, but one that adds a bit more risk to the card-based combat.

Other than that, *Deepest Chamber*'s structure will feel very familiar. You enter a floor, pick three battles, and then you plunge down to the next. You can occasionally hop back to the shop to extricate a card from your deck, or to buy new cards, powerful trinkets, or potions. Where the game falls short in the comparison is its lack of random events, which help to flesh out runs of *Slay the Spire* and genre-mate *Monster Train*.

What's here is a nugget of potential: an absorbing battle system, generous with its tactical options, while at the same time slightly baggier and more forgiving than *Slay the Spire*. I'm hopeful *Deepest Chamber* will get more meat on its bones over its time in Early Access, as it deserves to stay afloat in the endless u-bend of deck-building roguelikes.

Tom Sykes

PLAYED IT



Occasionally, NPCs will show up for a chat.



IN THIS EARLY ACCESS BUILD THERE IS ONLY ONE AREA, THE SEWERS, TO EXPLORE

Margaret

Remember our sprawling market. Full of life and colors. Now only ash and bones remain. Anyway I guess it's not that bad down here. Not so many colors but smells galore.

Back



ABOVE: Creepy yet cheery, this could be an NPC from *Dark Souls*.

LEFT: Cards can be 'nailed' to your hand, so they appear every round.

Dying Light 2: Stay Human

LIGHTS OUT

In the open-world post-apocalypse of **DYING LIGHT 2: STAY HUMAN**, the choices you make can change an entire city.

By Andy Kelly





Dying Light 2: Stay Human

A

iden Caldwell, enigmatic hero of *Dying Light 2: Stay Human*, is a member of the Pilgrims – a loose gathering of post-apocalyptic drifters wandering the ruins of the old world. He arrives in the City, the nameless metropolis where the game is set, looking for his sister, Mia. “Aiden is plagued by vague, disconnected memories of her,” says lead game designer Tymon Smektała. “When he learns the people responsible for what happened to her have been found there, he embarks on a mission to learn the truth.”

This open-world zombie game is going a step beyond the original, backing its free-running, undead swarms, and brutal melee combat up with an interactive, branching story with an impact on. The City isn't just home to countless numbers of aggressive infected, but warring factions of human survivors too. It's a big old mess, but a compelling setting for a survival horror game. And one of the most interesting features in *Dying Light 2* is how the City changes dramatically depending on the time of day.

NIGHT UNLIFE

When night falls, the streets are overrun with infected. The safe

option is to stay on the rooftops and wait for the sun to send them scurrying back into their lairs. But if you're feeling brave, venturing down into the depths of the city can net you some quality loot. Building interiors that are usually teeming with zombies are suddenly empty, with only a few stragglers remaining, letting you sneak in to grab gear and upgrades. Then you just have to worry about making it out and back to the relative safety of the rooftops.

“The City transforms at night,” says Smektała. “Citizens hide away in their hiding places, the glow of UV lamps is visible everywhere, and the silence of the night is interrupted by the sound of monsters crawling out into the streets. A world full of dangers by day becomes a whole different challenge at night. The lairs of the infected become empty, giving you the opportunity to explore and find useful and sometimes very valuable items.”

Techland describes *Dying Light 2*'s setting as a ‘modern dark age.’ While most zombie games are set in the immediate aftermath of an outbreak, or long after it, this story takes place just as the world has gotten over the initial shock and is starting to rebuild. “Fifteen years have passed since the global apocalypse that followed the

virus emerging, and we've tried to make the City reflect this in a realistic and credible way,” says Smektała. “We looked for inspiration in the cities where we live. We let our imaginations run wild and thought about what would change if such a major catastrophe occurred.”

“We imagined what parts of the city would stay human, and which parts would be reclaimed by nature. What kind of living spaces would be created by people, and what structures would be formed during these 15 years by the hands of people who cut off from technology. This is how our modern dark age was created – a civilisation that returned to medieval times in the modern day, and with the memory of the world before the fall.”

ALL CHANGE

Interestingly, the City isn't a totally fixed, static environment. Parts of it can change based on the many decisions you make over the course of the game. Meaningful player choice is something the developer is striving for – including making you feel bad as the consequences of your actions play out in front of you. As you progress through the story you'll

As with any good zombie apocalypse, humans can be just as monstrous as the monsters themselves.

TECHLAND DESCRIBES DYING LIGHT 2'S SETTING AS A 'MODERN DARK AGE'



I SCREAM

How the Howler was created



"When designing the Howler, we tried to emphasise its main function in the world, which is screaming," says Katarzyna Bech, lead character concept artist. "It has a painful growth, a mutation, on the chest and lungs, as well as on the larynx, which suggests where this incredible and

terrifying sound comes from. It can even paralyse the player for a moment. The Howler is also aided in its screams by a wide-open, four-part maw. This creature is not physically strong, so its body shows it through its emaciation, protruding bones, hanging pale skin, and mutated atrophic hand."

affect the lives of people in small, individual ways, but also change the layout of the City itself.

"Your decisions can shape the appearance of locations and affect the factions living in the City, and you will see the outcome of this impact on the environment," says Smektała. "It's worth going through the game more than once, or in co-op, to discover everything that is impacted by these choices. There are interesting sidequests that will have their own consequences," he adds. "Some choices you may even regret when your actions inadvertently make the lives of other residents of the City difficult."

Getting around the City is made easier by the fact that Aiden is a skilled free-runner. The parkour system in *Dying Light 2* is much more complex and natural-feeling than in the previous game, and you'll have access to way more moves.

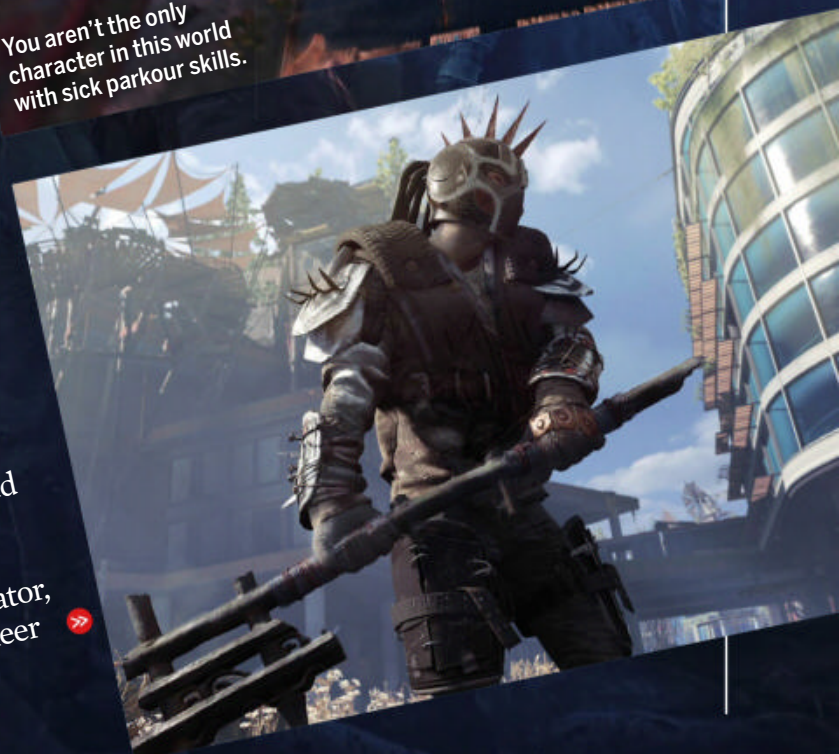
"Parkour is the essence of *Dying Light*," says Smektała. "It is our beloved child who makes us proud. Bartosz Kulon [programmer and designer] came to Adrian 'Pyza' Ciszewski [director] many years ago and said, 'Yeah, *Dead Island* is great, but what if we added roof-running and climbing?' And that was where the idea for *Dying Light* was born."

"There are thousands of animations based on, among others, the movements of the legendary father of this discipline, David Belle. We have crazy parkour combinations that allow you to do really wild acrobatics and tools that allow us to diversify limited human movements with new possibilities. In addition, there is a refreshed grappling hook and paraglider system, which increase the importance of gravity and natural movement in the game. It had to be immersive and satisfying since the player's main way of moving around the City would be on foot."

David Belle is a French actor, choreographer, and stunt coordinator, and the founder and leading pioneer



You aren't the only character in this world with sick parkour skills.



COVER FEATURE

Dying Light 2: Stay Human

In a world where firearms are almost non-existent, a bow and arrow comes in very handy indeed.



of parkour – so having him in a game where parkour is a key feature is a pretty big deal. “David is an important part of the game,” says Smektała. “Starting with him playing the character of Hakon, to the extra realism his mocap session gave us, of course, he’s been the ‘father of parkour’ for many years, and from the first game he’s been both an inspiration and our guide to authentic parkour techniques and the amazing movements the body can make. We couldn’t imagine creating *Dying Light 2* without David Belle.”

DEAD SET A history of Techland zombie games



DEAD ISLAND
2011

Zombies infest the fictional tropical island of Banoi, and four survivors are forced into a battle to escape a luxury holiday resort.



DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE
2013

Another island in the Banoi archipelago suffers its own zombie invasion, and another team of survivors steps up to fight them.



DYING LIGHT
2015

A fictional Middle-Eastern city called Harran is overrun by zombies, and an undercover agent is sent to infiltrate the quarantine zone.



DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING
2016

In this major expansion for *Dying Light*, the first game’s hero returns to investigate a potential cure for the virus.

OLD YELLER

You’ll need to master Aiden’s parkour skills to outsmart *Dying Light 2*’s wider range of zombies, especially when you encounter the Howler. “At first, the Howler was a stationary enemy, almost like a CCTV camera, just scouting the area,” says Smektała. “But, as we were working on the game, we started developing our stealth mechanics a little bit more. “The Howler naturally became a primary obstacle in all situations

"THE HOWLER NATURALLY BECAME A PRIMARY OBSTACLE IN ALL SITUATIONS INVOLVING STEALTH"

The sequel looks significantly prettier than the original.

involving stealth. The archetype for the enemy stayed with us since the initial inception – it was supposed to be a sentry that could spot the player and alarm other units around. But during development, we realised we could do a lot more with it, like having it patrol the area. Howlers don't actually engage on sight. Instead, they emit a high-pitched scream which will attract any infected in the area and lure them towards your position."

I ask Smektała about the balance of story and action in *Dying Light 2*. Storytelling is something the team is clearly putting an increased focus on, but to what extent? "*Dying Light 2* is an action game," he says. "We have parkour as a way to move around the world freely, rewarding combat, a variety of weapons and even parkour moves that you can use creatively

while fighting. The animation base is huge, which allows players to overcome the many dangers in the City in a spectacular manner.

"However, it was very important for us to create an interesting and engaging story as well. People in the world will react to the player's actions and choices, and they can become friends or enemies depending on your decisions. There's also a new system called city alignment, where you can assign specific zones of the city to one of the factions, which of course may also influence the world and the story in interesting ways."

There are three main factions in *Dying Light 2*. The Peacekeepers are dedicated to eliminating all threats to humanity in the world. "They want to rally citizens to their views and secure territory for a new society based on their principles," says Smektała. "On the other hand, the Survivors believe that their

survival depends on their ability to foster craftsmanship and relearn ancient skills to thrive. They value experimentation, art, culture, and knowledge, and passing this down to their children."

Then, lastly, there are the Renegades. "They believe in sacrifice for the greater good," says Smektała. "They're a ruthless, militarised criminal organisation, resorting to immoral means to ensure their survival." When you play *Dying Light 2* you'll be able to work for these three factions – but working for one that is the enemy of another won't go unnoticed.

And what about that *Stay Human* subtitle in the game name? I ask Smektała what it represents. "As you can imagine, in an apocalypse, society becomes brutal and all its elements are reevaluated. The title covers two issues, physical and mental. On the physical side, this is of course avoiding transformation due to infection: controlling the disease through biomarkers and taking care of exposure to UV rays. In short, 'stay human' as a living being and prevent yourself from turning into a monster."

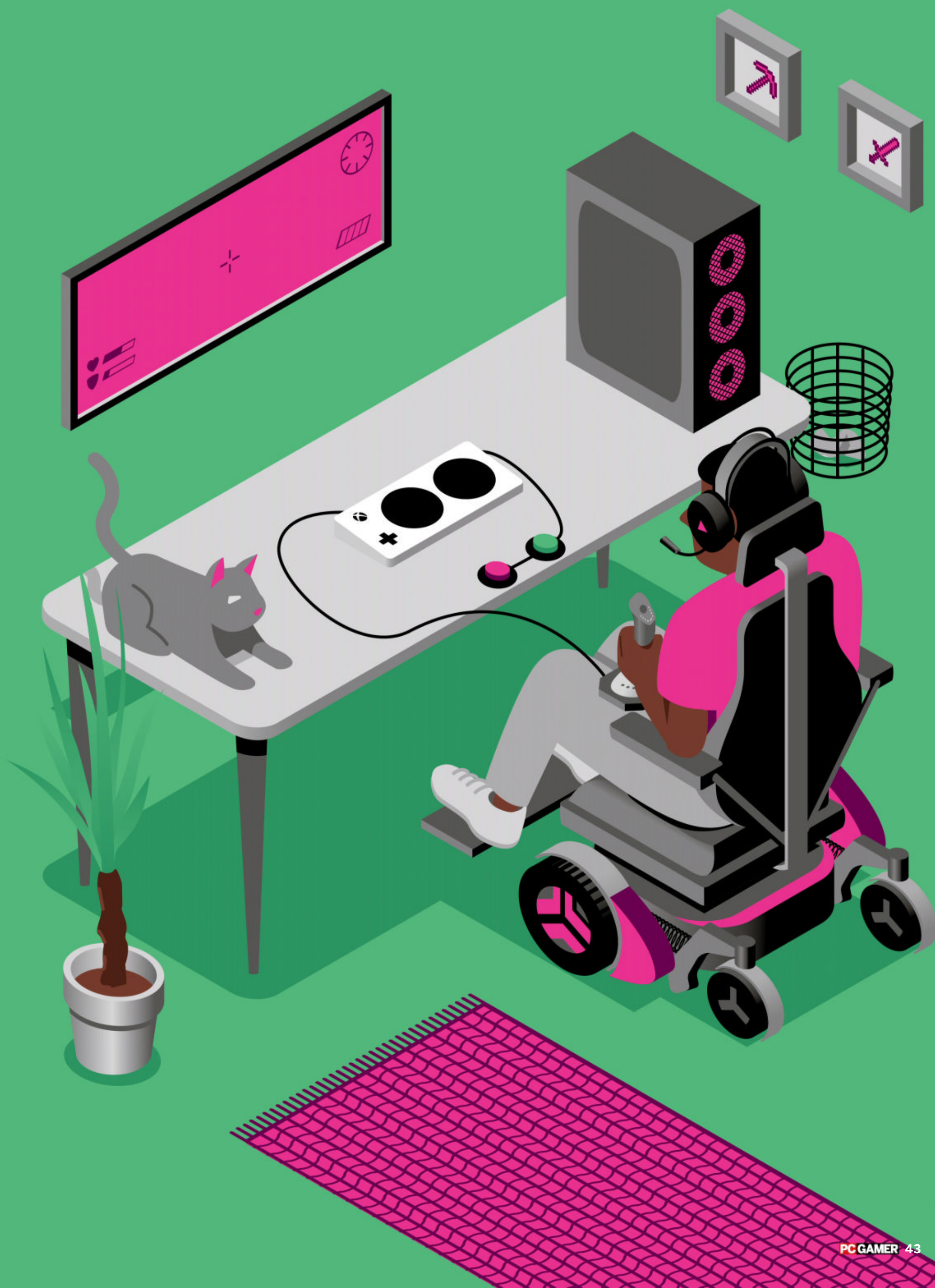
"The second layer, humanity, is about remaining human according to the norms and principles we know. The world after the apocalypse has changed in almost every respect, and it will be up to the player whether they will be guided by the good of the individual, the greater good, or maybe take a different path altogether."

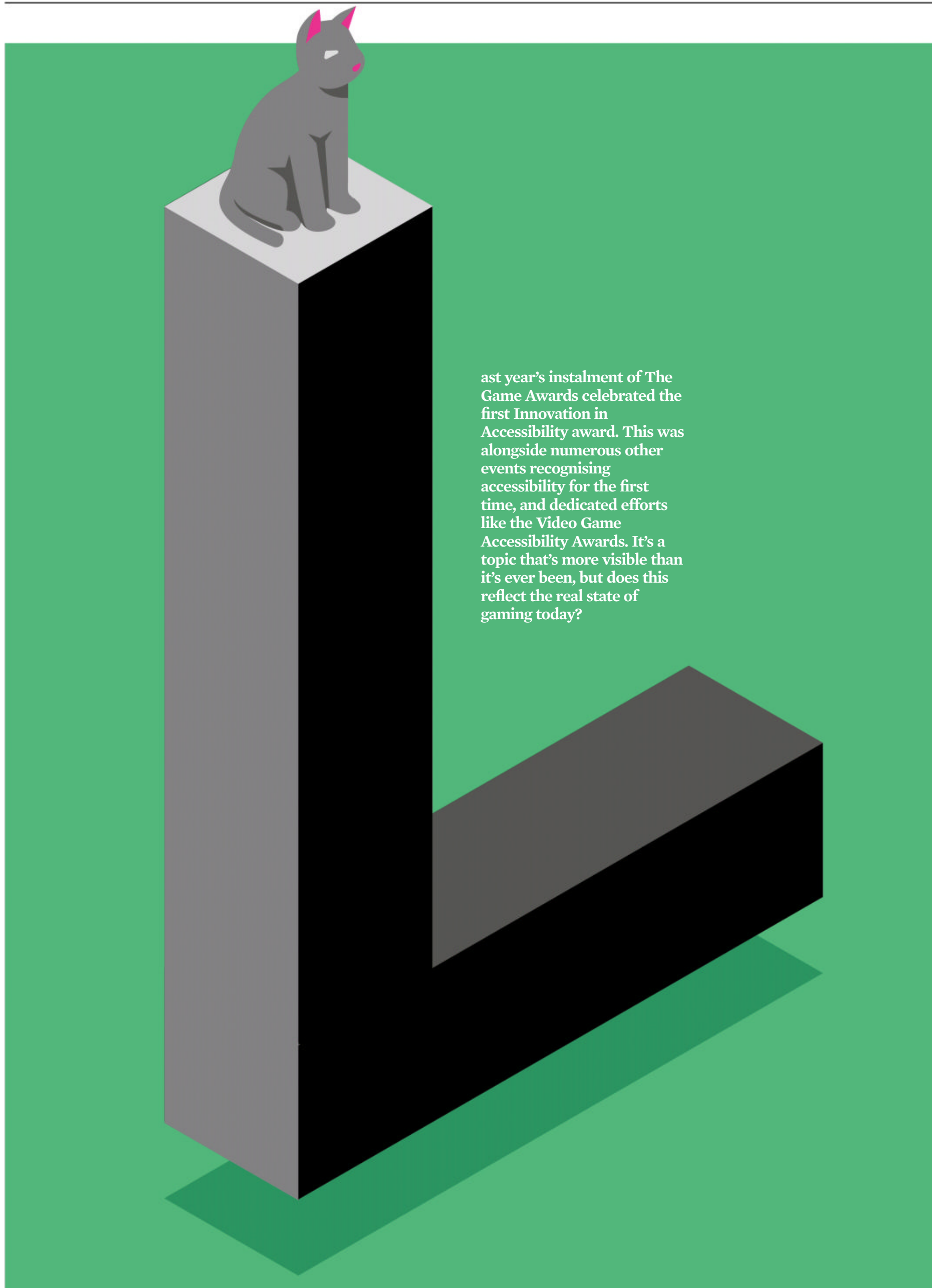
You can decide what path you'll take when *Dying Light 2: Stay Human* is released on December 7. ■

WE ALL PLAY GAMES

From indies to blockbusters, developers
are striving to include disabled players
now more than ever

By Ruth Cassidy

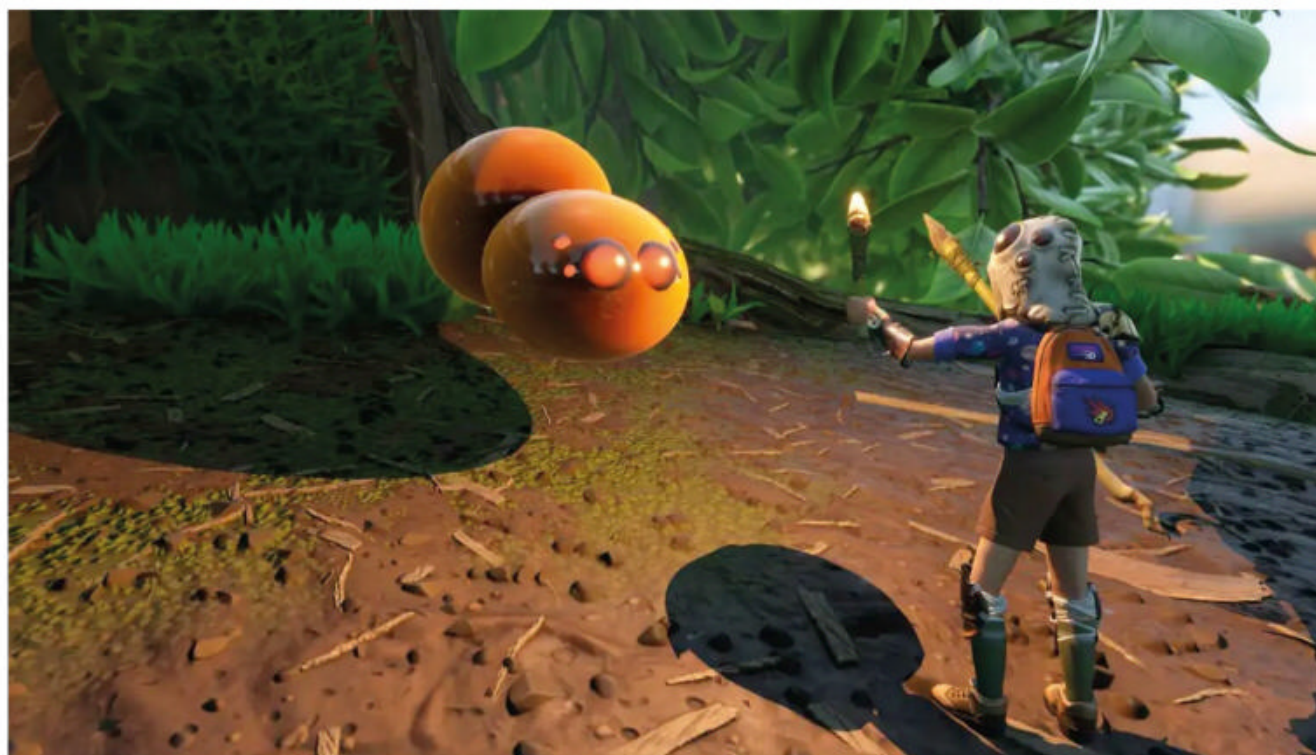




ast year's instalment of The Game Awards celebrated the first Innovation in Accessibility award. This was alongside numerous other events recognising accessibility for the first time, and dedicated efforts like the Video Game Accessibility Awards. It's a topic that's more visible than it's ever been, but does this reflect the real state of gaming today?

While we might talk about some games as being ‘accessible to new players’ or an ‘accessible entry point to a niche genre’, accessibility here means access for disabled people – who make up 20% of working age adults in the UK, and 10.4% in the US. So while mainstream games awards may have their flaws – rewarding some of the industry’s darker aspects like crunch and abusive management – it’s still meaningful when they recognise efforts to remove the barriers that might exclude us.

Accessibility doesn’t only make things better for disabled players, however. David Tisserand, Ubisoft’s senior accessibility manager, shared on Twitter that around 95% of players leave



“FOR US, ACCESSIBILITY IS ABOUT REMOVING UNINTENTIONAL BARRIERS”

subtitles on when it’s the default setting, and around 75% turn them on in the options at least once. This is a significantly higher percentage of the population than those who have hearing loss. Over email, Tisserand says, “For us, accessibility is about removing unintentional barriers so that as many players as possible can enjoy our games.” And concerning subtitles, that includes people with difficulty processing audio, noisy roommates, babies they can’t wake up, crunchy Doritos – the list goes on.

SPIDER SLIDER

Ubisoft took two nominations for Innovation in Accessibility with *Watch Dogs: Legion* and *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, but another nominee was Obsidian’s Early Access survival game, *Grounded*. It sees players shrunk down to bite-size teen adventurers – an unnerving experience if the thing threatening to bite you is a spider. *Grounded*’s Arachnophobia Safe Mode made news last year for being the first game of its kind to buck the trend of forcing spiders on



TOP: *Grounded*’s least spider-y spider removes all legs and furry textures.

ABOVE: *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* full key rebinding was praised by the first Video Games Accessibility Awards.

players with a phobia of them, allowing you to remove disturbing elements of their design or, at the top level, turn them into cute blobs.

Grounded also highlights the way that accessibility can be enhanced in even its more basic structures, like its ‘talk to me’ feature: a text-to-speech setting for its UI. As senior programmer Brian Macintosh explained, it wasn’t initially his idea, but something publisher Xbox Game Studios encouraged. “I didn’t initially understand how someone who is blind could even play *Grounded*, but it turns out there are many people who can see well enough to navigate the game but have trouble reading text for vision or even cognitive reasons. For them, this feature takes the game from ‘barely playable’ to ‘quite playable’ which is a huge win.”

Without downplaying the seriousness of phobias, most of us can relate to finding spiders unsettling – I used the slider myself when it turned out my tolerance for the critters strongly depended on our relative size being biased in my favour. While this approach is inarguably

NOT JUST AAA-CCESSIBLE

Indies are leading the charge of accessibility



HADES

Hades’ introduction of God Mode was well-loved, ensuring disabled players didn’t hit a wall in the roguelike with its incremental increase of Zagreus’ demigod defences.



PARADISE KILLER

Detective game *Paradise Killer* is stylish, but not murderous on the eyes – letting players disable the psychedelic backgrounds that could cause vertigo or motion sickness.



CHICORY: A COLORFUL TALE

Chicory is a notably colourblind accessible painting game – and it also allows players to disable ‘wet sounds’, which can be bad for players with misophonia.



DISABLED PLAYERS ARE BEING INCLUDED WHO DEVELOPERS DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE PLAYING THEIR GAMES

» innovative, *Grounded*'s text-to-speech option being a first for Obsidian represents something no less notable. Disabled players are being included who developers didn't even expect to be playing their games.

WATCH THIS

Beside industry giants Obsidian and Ubisoft, an unexpected nominee for Innovation in Accessibility was indie creation *HyperDot*. The game features only one mechanic: to move, or more precisely, to dodge out of the way of the polygons flinging themselves at you at high speed. *HyperDot*'s design was always centred around flexible approaches, but creator Charles McGregor credits a friend of his being gifted a Tobii Eye Tracker with the moment he realised he could make the game far more accessible.

"After I got [eye tracker compatibility] in there I was like, 'Oh, if you can't hold a controller, if you have a motor disability, you would be able to actually play all of *HyperDot* with it,' and that really was the start

of, 'Oh yeah, I'm going to actually take this a little bit more seriously and look into this.'" From there, his publisher Glitch supported him to reach out to accessibility consultant Cherry Thompson, as well as seek feedback from disabled streamers.

Watching streamers play the game was the first time McGregor had seen the game played outside of

the build on his own computer. "Anytime that somebody couldn't play the game, whether it be a physical disability, or whether it be the game was just too challenging or something like that, that was just a gut punch, like, 'Oh man I don't want you to not be able to play the game.' I think that that was a huge motivator for me." As a result,

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

Accessibility is improving – but for some it's hit-and-miss



CYBERPUNK 2077

Last year's *Cyberpunk 2077* needed a rapid hotfix after journalist Liana Ruppert discovered multiple seizure triggers in the game, including mandatory braindance sequences.



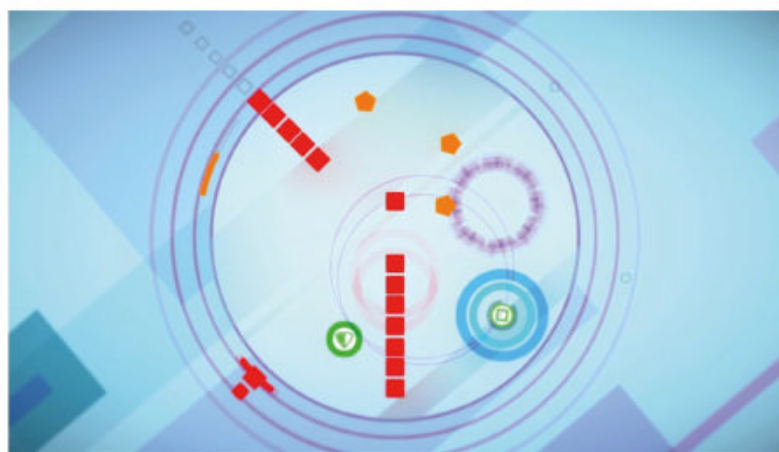
RESIDENT EVIL: VILLAGE

Capcom's latest entry in its iconic horror series neglected to caption its sound effects, leaving the game more stark than spooky for deaf players.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: VALHALLA

Accessibility failures and successes can come from the same game, such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, which doesn't subtitle Eivor's frequent self talk.



HyperDot offers support for seven unique controllers – including tilt and touch, as well as eye tracking.

MORE THAN LEDS

Support for alternative input is important because PC gaming is not, out of the box, accessible for everybody. Regardless of the content of any game, a mouse and keyboard can itself be a barrier. Alternative methods of input aren't a solution to inaccessible game design – but at the same time, even the best designed game is inaccessible if you can't use a PC. But, with PC gaming you can play with whatever peripherals you prefer, whether it's a glowing rainbow mouse or no mouse at all.

Charity AbleGamers helps connect disabled players with the technology they may need to play. Their objective, as stated on their website: "Our mission is to enable play, in order to combat social isolation, foster inclusive communities, to improve the lives of people with disabilities." Disabled players can request support, and access individual peer counselling to help assess what they might need to adapt, with AbleGamers then also providing that equipment for those in financial need. The site also hosts a self-help library that breaks down what technology is available for impairments such as gaming with one hand, or a visual impairment.

TOP: *HyperDot* is partly so accessible because it has only one player action: move.

BELOW: The Xbox Adaptive controller is one of the more flexible options for alternative controllers.

Technology solutions vary from specialist controllers (like the GrizPaw, which advertises being the fastest one-handed controller), to customising the Xbox Adaptive Controller with the best switches for your needs. As described by the AbleGamers site, "You can find switches for a variety of situations including, light touch, rigid, and even ones called 'twitch switches,' which can be placed on a muscle such as your calf or eyebrows."

There are also players for whom alternative forms of input don't make PC gaming more accessible at all, as it's the required posture that is the issue. "Because of POTS, sitting upright for long periods like you normally would in a desk chair can make me dizzy and tired," explains Els White, director of Spider Lily Studios, who keeps his chair reclined fully back, and has his monitor attached to an adjustable arm to tilt it in-line with his face. From this setup, he both plays games and works on his own. "My keyboard goes on a raised lap rest, and my mouse on a table beside me. Much easier on my heart!"

PAINFUL PLAY

Accessibility isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, as not all disabled people have the same needs. For some, there aren't adjustments they can make – PC gaming is simply less accessible than the alternatives. "I tend to avoid PC games because after working all day at my computer, sitting there for even longer causes significant back and joint pain," says Courtney

Craven, editor in chief of accessibility review site 'Can I Play That?'. They've also tried playing PC games with a controller instead of a mouse, "But that always seems to result in poor posture and again, more pain."

Issues like pain and other sensory and motor impairments are often the first thing we think of in terms of accessibility. But, like *Grounded*'s Arachnophobia Safe Mode, *Ikenfell* makes space for inclusive mental health. Creator Chevy Ray says, "[O]ur sensitivity consultation team [Joanna Blackhart, Jeriko Green and Aivi Tran] made a really good case for adding in an option to enable context-sensitive content warnings in the game."

These content warnings appear in-game and before skippable cutscenes that contain potentially triggering content, such as self-injury. "This is an extremely rare feature for any game to have, even in AAA companies that take accessibility very seriously. The feature has been immensely well-received, so I hope it's a feature more companies adopt in the future."

Ikenfell is a colourful turn-based tactical RPG about magical students and pettable cats. Cast a multitude of spells, and hit the button at just the right time to land a great hit and do critical damage – or mitigate it, when you're defending. Notably, you can toggle how much timing affects gameplay (if at all). For players who would still find combat inaccessible, they would typically have to not play the game – but in *Ikenfell* they can take the option to instantly win fights >>



» at any moment. “One of these options has them playing through the game and getting to experience the rest of its art, music, sounds, puzzles, and story. The other does not. I think it’s probably quite obvious which of those two things I consider the superior choice.”

SOULS-DISLIKE

Ikenfell’s skippable combat highlights the debate about the way games are ‘supposed’ to be played. Games that are well loved for being difficult – you know the ones – are often passionately defended by their fans because they’re supposed to be a challenge. The mastery of the game, and its mechanics, are its own reward, and making any part of it skippable (or easier) in the name of accessibility would defeat the point, goes the argument.

A counterpoint: *Frostpunk* is a difficult game, and I’ve poured tens of hours into it trying to get the best possible outcome for every single campaign, for fun. When playing games like *Dishonored*, I set specific challenges – don’t be seen and don’t use powers and loot all the art, etc. I like being challenged, but that doesn’t translate to, say, the precise timing required of *Hollow Knight*. The Mantis Lords move faster than I can see.

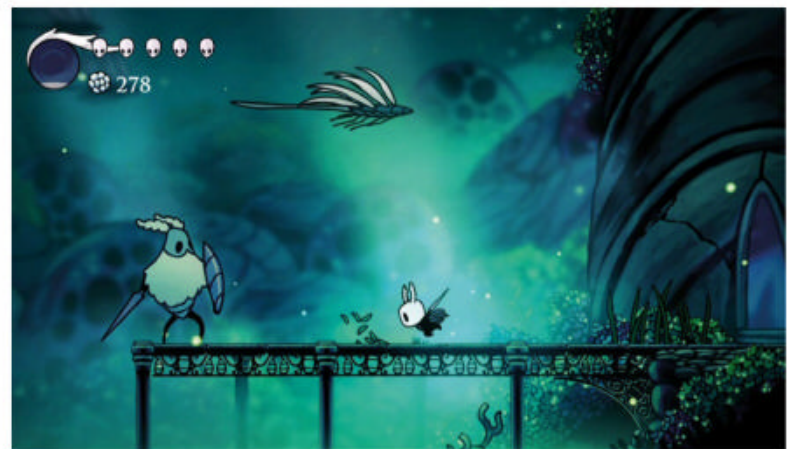
‘Difficulty’ is a broad concept, so it’s hard to pin down how it relates to accessibility. When a specific barrier is ‘making’ a game difficult, addressing that barrier is often a more straightforward solution. At the same time, what we think of as

an ‘easy mode’ is a shorthand for a set of tools that reduces a game’s demands. Those tools are still accessibility tools, particularly for players with chronic fatigue, pain, and/or impaired reflexes.

As an alternative, some difficult games in recent years have opted to implement assist modes – platformer *Celeste*’s being one of the most well-known. Rather than dropping mechanical complexity by an arbitrary level, players can fine tune effects as needed like Madeline’s stamina, or number of dashes, allowing the player more time to think or to course correct. Any assist mode is tailored for the gameplay it’s accompanying – compare an invulnerable Madeline climbing through the murder-fungus to *Control*’s Jesse, flinchingly hit by every bullet even when invincible.

Some players maintain that difficult games without any way to make them more accessible are ‘the developer’s vision’, but accessibility specialist Ian Hamilton explains that this is one of the most common misconceptions that players have about how game development works.

“What designers have in mind for their players is really about an emotional experience. And that thing on the disc or that you’ve just downloaded is not the vision, it’s not an experience in itself. It’s just a means to an end, a framework put in place to try [to] let players have that kind of experience. The experience only comes into existence through interaction with the player – and players are a varied bunch, so



TOP: *Hollow Knight*’s unwinding environmental storytelling is beautiful – but locked behind inaccessible gameplay.

ABOVE: Eerie action-adventure *Control* introduced its assist mode a year after its initial release.

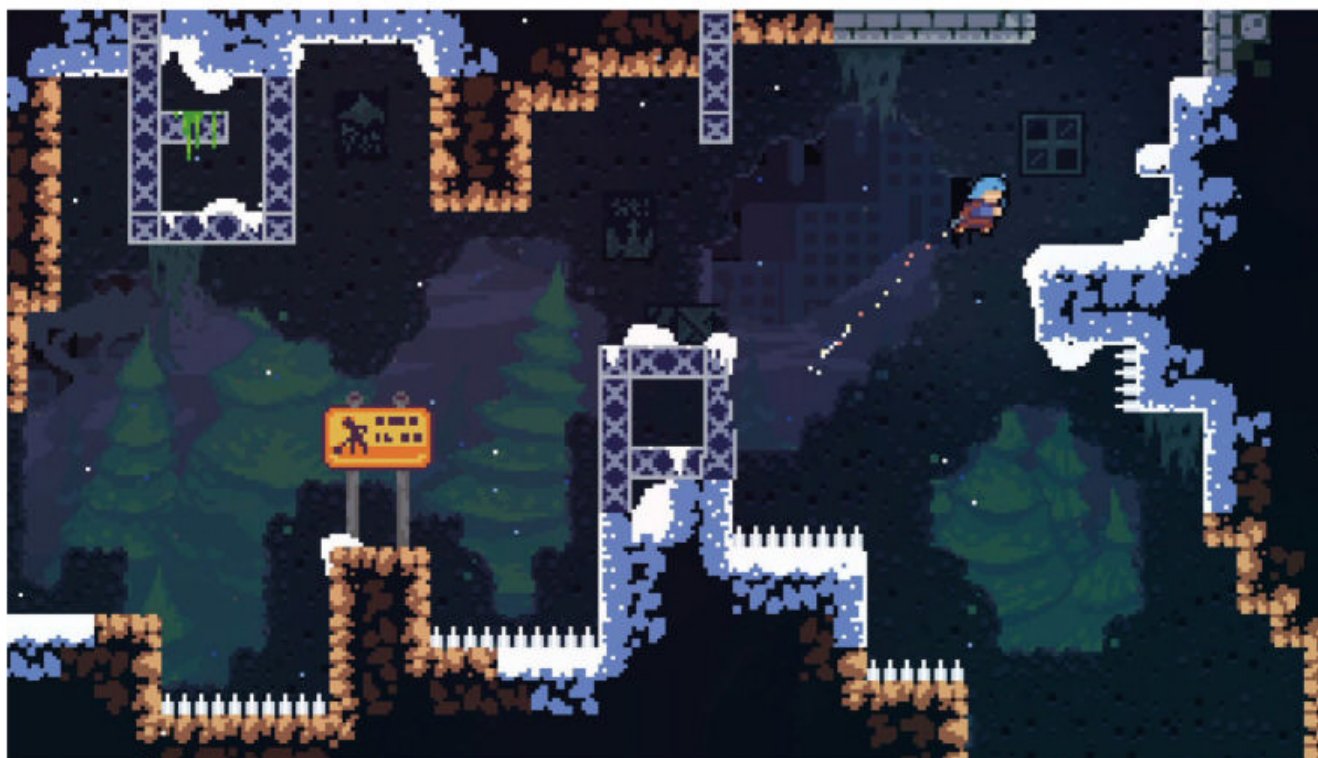
whether what they experience matches the designer’s intent depends on how that framework interacts with their own personal needs, abilities and preferences.”

‘Difficult games’ aren’t a monolith, and no one game is difficult for the same reason as another. Whether it’s to challenge players, for narrative theming, or to encourage players to fully juice a combat system, every difficult game wants the player to have a certain experience. That experience does not inherently need to leave out disabled players.

STARTING LINE

We might celebrate innovations in accessibility in games, but that only suggests that there are leaps and bounds to go – even if we are making them. “The state of the field is quite unrecognisable compared to even a few short years ago,” Hamilton says, reflecting on his 16 years of experience in the industry. “It wasn’t long ago that a single mainstream game including a single accessibility accommodation was big news, and now it’s hard to find any big name game that doesn’t have a swathe of considerations, and indies are right there at the forefront of progress too.

“But we’re still really only at the start. There hasn’t yet been any AAA that has managed to nail all of the basics, things like remapping, subtitle presentation, colour-blindness, text

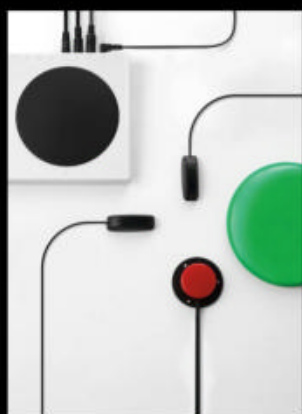




“THE STATE OF THE FIELD IS QUITE UNRECOGNISABLE COMPARED TO EVEN A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO”

FIX THIS PLEASE

The four most complained about accessibility issues



REMAPPING

Remapping (or rebinding) has a huge number of accessibility applications, from macros and alternative controller use to remapping individual keys that are uncomfortable to use. Like thumbstick-clicks, which are the worst. As it stands, too few games offer robust options for players to make these changes, which can exclude many.



TEXT SIZE

Text in videogames is too small, and therefore, difficult to read. This is a universal design complaint that comes from people who wouldn't consider themselves as having vision problems (along with those who explicitly do). Some games have large text, or text size options – but I've yet to see the complaint that text is too large.



COLOUR BLINDNESS

Many games exclusively use colour to communicate important information, from using coloured silhouettes to indicate enemies and friendlies to featuring colour-based puzzle solutions. For the large amount of players who can't differentiate those colours easily (or at all), that information is lost. Friendly fire, everywhere.



SUBTITLE PRESENTATION

There are many factors that affect whether subtitles are actually useful or not. Tiny text is a frequent offender, along with putting more text on-screen than can be easily read at once. And once that's resolved – is it made clear who's speaking? Where the sound is coming from? Is the call coming from inside the house? We need that info.

size, and effect/camera intensity. And we are a very very long way from getting beyond that to where [we] really need to be, which is any gamer being able to pick up any game and have a reasonable expectation that they'll be able to play, that they won't be unnecessarily locked out or have an unnecessarily poor experience.”

The relative accessibility of a game is a hard thing as a consumer to predict. I can pick up a physically undemanding adventure game and find myself waylaid by flashing lights and tiny tiny text, or demo an upcoming action game and find incredibly comprehensive difficulty settings. The one thing consistent with most people I spoke to, however, was that awareness of accessibility in development has increased hugely in only a short amount of time. Developers care, and there's a meaningful push for games to be more accessible and more inclusive. With the development cycle of games being the length it is, I'm excited to see what will be winning accessibility awards in 2022. ■

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DEAD

For hundreds of days,
Brian Hicks battled
to finish **DAYZ** – and
didn't quite get there.

By Jeremy Peel

REPORT



Y

ou may not be able to see them, but there are secret PC gamers hidden deep within the bowels of the major console companies. Back in 2013, Brian Hicks was a project manager at Microsoft Studios – a professional Xbox evangelist. But behind the scenes, he was working to build relations between his bosses and the makers of a quintessential PC game he had fallen in love with: *DayZ*.

“You know, I’m doing this so much,” Hicks wrote in one email to *DayZ* creator Dean Hall, “you should just hire me.” Asked to fly out to Prague for a two-week working interview, Hicks was shocked to discover that the *DayZ* team, as development on the standalone game began, was roughly five people.

“It was a very, very barebones team,” he says. “It’s hard for me to overstate how garage development it was.”

That turns out to be literally true. At Bohemia’s Mnisek campus – a collection of countryside cabins 30 kilometres south of Prague, once used for weekend retreats during the communist era of Czechoslovakia – the garage was converted into a motion capture lab. The *DayZ* team was squeezed into 120 square feet above the laundry room.

“I was very charmed by this small village life,” Hicks says. After a

couple of awkward months back in the US awaiting budgetary approval from Bohemia, he got the thumbs up, took an 80% pay cut, and packed a couple of suitcases.

“I remember walking out of Microsoft on my last day at 11pm, because I didn’t want to leave anything undone,” Hicks says. “There was a big LED clock in the lobby, counting down to the launch of the Xbox One, and there was less than 48 hours on it. The next morning I flew to Prague and started working after maybe a four-hour nap.”

WAKE UP DEAD

DayZ’s development was no less hectic. Hall and Hicks spearheaded the march to launch on Steam Early Access, which came sooner than expected. “I remember Dean telling the team that the word from on high was that if we didn’t get *DayZ* out onto Steam before the end of the year we might not have a job,” Hicks says. “It was crunch, I won’t lie about it. It was a fucking tornado, there was so little time to breathe.”

The launch build of *DayZ* was held together by “duct tape, wooden matches, and prayers”. The team watched for spikes in resource consumption and, over a 12-hour bridge call with server hosting company Multiplay, optimised where they could. Valve pulled down a trailer that showed a character committing suicide, infuriating Hall, who had been up all night making it.

Hicks was pulling late nights himself. Due to a misunderstanding

of how Valve Anti-Cheat worked, *DayZ* launched without any protection from hackers. Hicks filled the gap by watching streams to find cheats, waiting for them to log off, then moving their characters into the ocean so that they’d freeze to death.

The consequences of sleep deprivation became clear when Hicks accidentally deleted the game’s live database during peak hours. “I remember realising what I had done,” he says. “I remember the feeling of all the blood in my face leaving.” Thankfully, Multiplay had backups, and the game was restored to an earlier version by the time Hall had returned from an interview – the same in which he announced his departure from Bohemia.

“I am a grenade,” Hall told Eurogamer. “I have a specific use. I can talk people up to the ledge and get them to jump off it. But eventually, that’s the bad person to have.” Through the first half of 2014, the *DayZ* team toured the world’s biggest game shows, addressing its millions-strong playerbase from Rezzed and PAX East. And then, in the summer, Hall transitioned to an advisory role, having already stayed at Bohemia far longer than planned.

The camping trip started off pleasantly enough.

DayZ’s core development team is now in Prague, where Bohemia has its HQ.





CATCH-UP CREW

Hicks took over, and a new structure set in. He pushed for regular status reports to the *DayZ* community, which was enormous but sceptical. Because of the rushed launch, the Bohemia team had started off on the back foot – *DayZ*'s alpha was leaner than the free mod that had preceded it, and fans knew it. "It was me trying to get to where I knew we wanted to be when we started," Hicks says. "I wanted to reach feature parity with *DayZ Mod*, before it started splintering off."

Because the game was already in motion, some aspects of *DayZ*'s development – like the engine it ran on, and the new renderer Hall had promised as a tonic for its miserable performance – were set in stone by the time Hicks picked up the reins.

"I stand behind those decisions," Hicks says. "I do wish we could have done more traditional closed door development on the core technology before launching the game. It's easy to say that knowing that 5.8 million copies were sold. It's a lot of money to be able to sit up here and go, 'We should have done it differently.' Realistically, maybe we couldn't have."

BEST LAID PLANS

The DayZ features that never happened



UNDERGROUND BASES

Dean Hall's hope was that tunnelled homes could save space, leaving the Chernarus above free to roam. But player bases are built upwards out of tents and towers.



ANIMAL COMPANIONS

Bohemia floated the idea of animal companions like dogs early on, as well as rideable horses. But the only rides that showed up in the end were made of metal.



MAN-MADE VIRUSES

Not malware, but infective agents – researched and even manufactured by players. Labs would have been tough to set up, and tougher to keep running.

HICKS ACCIDENTALLY DELETED THE GAME'S LIVE DATABASE



These days, every corner of Chernarus is well plotted by players.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT BOHEMIA WAS CAPITALISING ON A PHENOMENON

» It's important to remember that Bohemia was capitalising on a phenomenon, and didn't know how long it would last. Holding off on the Early Access launch of *DayZ* would have been like shutting down the fidget spinner factories in the summer of 2017. The competition wasn't so much hot on Bohemia's heels as stomping on its toes – *Rust*, inspired by Hall's mod, came out several days before standalone *DayZ*. "There's blood in the water," Hicks

says. "There's this new genre and everybody wants in on it. It's chaos."

Every small victory was viewed in the context of how far the game still had to go. In a 2014 PC Gamer cover feature, Hall had spoken about his dreams for underground bases, gangs with matching tattoos, and communities of players working together in specialised disciplines, like the corps of *Eve Online*. But by 2017, those players were still waiting for basic features like smooth animations.

Nonetheless, Hicks realised that, in his words, all the creative direction had been done. "Systems that weren't even yet in the game had been completely prototyped out, whiteboarded, written down in design documentation," he says. "It was all there. More and more, my job was less having to guide the ship, and more going out and evangelising for the brand."

TRAVEL MAN

The creative director spent increasing amounts of time on planes, and realised he was homesick. Following the success of early battle royale game *H1Z1: King of the Kill*, he managed to convince Bohemia to buy

CZECH IT OUT

Great games from the Republic



MAFIA

Illusion Software's breakout hit still stands up to this day, both as a Scorsese-style crime fable about thugs in suits, and as a surprisingly realistic city driving simulation.



SPACE ENGINEERS

Transposed Minecraft-esque building to space, then added jetpacks and spaceships. Create a gravity generator and walk on asteroids with your mates.



AMERICAN TRUCK SIMULATOR

SCS Software's position in central Europe only seems to have encouraged its appetite for the American open road, and the mythology of the nomad trucker.



the IP for *Survivor GameZ* – the 2012 mod that had made Hicks' name in the first place, and laid the groundwork for the genre now dominated by *Fortnite* and *Warzone*.

"Marek [Spanel, Bohemia CEO] was sold on it," he says. "We were gonna split development between Bratislava and a Bohemia Interactive Seattle office. I was really excited about that, being able to continue to work on things I was passionate about back home."

The *Survivor GameZ* would have been *DayZ*'s pitch for the battle royale crown, and the timing was right – Bluehole hadn't yet begun development on *PUBG*. In fact, Bohemia was in talks to hire Brendan Greene, who at the time had just finished consulting on *H1Z1*.

"There was a lot of hemming and hawing, for some reason, that he wasn't technical enough to bring on," Hicks says. "I was like, 'Are you kidding? He did *DayZ Battle Royale*. He knows our engine.'" Bohemia's interview process was just as drawn out as it had been at the birth of *DayZ*, and while discussions were ongoing, Hicks got a call from Greene. "Hey man," Greene said. "I don't know what to do. This

company is offering me the creative director role on my own game." The company was Bluehole, and the game was *PUBG*. Hicks advised him to take the job. "I can't match that," he replied. "There's no way I can get Bohemia Interactive to put you in that senior of a role. You'd be stupid to pass this up."

The plans to open a *Survivor GameZ* studio in Seattle, meanwhile, had grown complicated. Bohemia was already opening a new office in Amsterdam, and that project was taking up all of the company's administrative bandwidth. When the time came to renew Hicks' residence visa in the Czech Republic, he instead rented a house in Redmond, Washington, intending to be the advance force for an army of *Survivor GameZ* developers.

The great irony was that, though he was back home, he never saw it – instead working during the night to match Czech hours, his windows covered by cardboard boxes and gaffer tape. Worse, it proved much harder to be *DayZ*'s leader from another continent.

DAYZ'D AND CONFUSED

"I had strong disagreements with some input of people on the corporate side, and I didn't seem to be able to pull the same weight that I did when I was in the office for all those years," he says. "In previous situations, if it was really bad, I could just drive up the hill and go knock on Marek's door."

Hicks felt heard by the development team, but the problems kept recurring. He was particularly

upset when Bohemia began planning to release *DayZ*'s 0.63 build as the game's official 1.0. "This is a bad idea," he said. "We don't have the feature set in the game right now that our store page has said is our target for the last four years."

Despite the protests, *DayZ* left Early Access in December 2018, after half a decade of open development. "I was not able to change any minds," Hicks says. "I got to this point where I was really stressed about *DayZ* all the time. I was angry, and would get into actual arguments. I wasn't designing new stuff. We were feature locked, and if anything we were scoping back, and that was what I was concerned about. I was like, 'Why am I doing this?'"

Hicks wrote his last *DayZ* status report from InXile's office in Newport Beach, California, where he'd taken a new job. *Survivor GameZ*, originally intended to be a standalone release, ultimately fizzled out after a few months as a mode for *DayZ*. Brendan Greene's star rose, and it became apparent that the era of survival games had finally given way to battle royale – a genre that made *DayZ* look slow and old-fashioned, even as it paid homage to Bohemia's open exploration and high-stakes scavenging.

Today, you can find Hicks where he began: streaming old builds of *DayZ* on Twitch. But now he has the distance to marvel at how much the game has transformed. "It was a blessing to come into my life," he says, "and it's a phenomenon that so many developers are not lucky enough to experience." ■



Kidnappings are a reliable source of shocking *DayZ* anecdotes.



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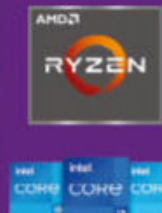


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REVIEW

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THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

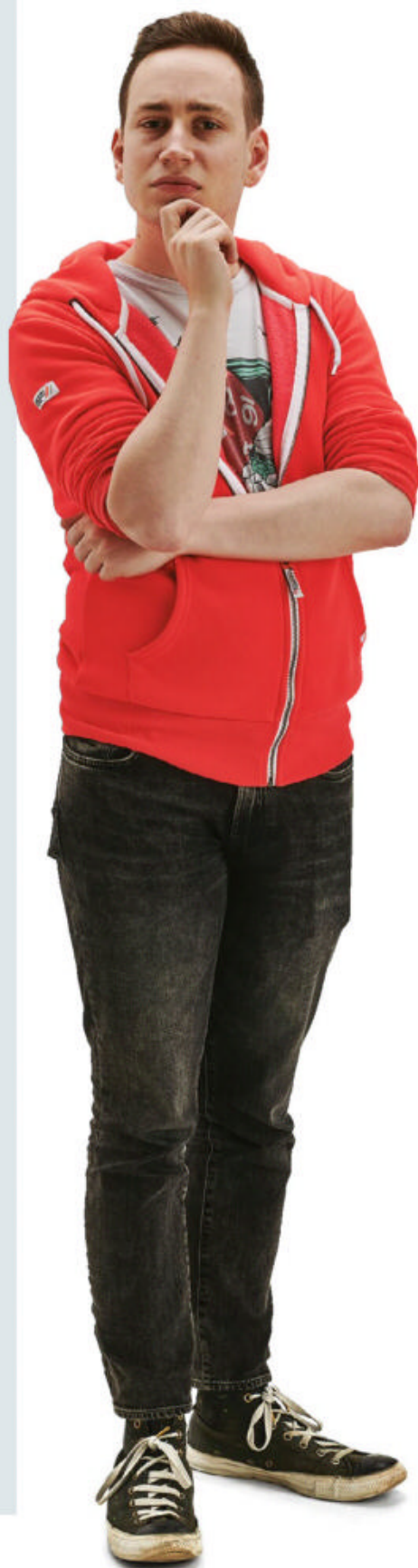
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



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Mixed up

Are videogame genres still meaningful these days? I'm always torn. On the one hand, for writers like myself they're an easy shorthand for giving readers a sense of what to expect – it's not helpful for us to have to re-explain what a first-person shooter is every time a *Call of Duty* comes out. But at the same time, games these days borrow so much from each other that all the major genres have become totally blurred. For example, you could describe both *The Ascent* and *Monster Hunter Stories 2* as being RPGs. But at the same time, the two almost couldn't be more different – one a dystopian top-down shooter, the other a cheery turn-based adventure, the only thing they really share in common is the basic idea of level ups. Is 'RPG' still a useful term at that point? Or does it mean totally different things to different people? Answers on a postcard to...

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- 86 Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin

FREE GAMES

- 88 Vedelem: The Golden Horde
- 89 **Downhill Jam**
- 89 Janosik

THEY'RE BACK

- 90 Untitled Goose Game
- 91 **Owlboy**
- 91 Shelter
- 91 **Planet Zoo**
- 91 Goat Simulator

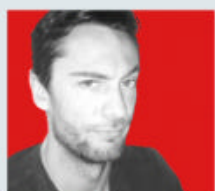
This month's historically significant reviewers...



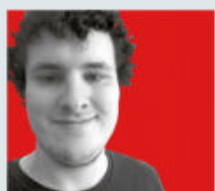
FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Old news
Currently playing
Old World
This month
Held a grudge for 200 years, which is extremely on-brand for him.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Mega-city living
Currently playing
The Ascent, Last Stop
This month
Fell in love with a dystopian hellscape, which is extremely on-brand for him too.



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Bird velocities
Currently playing
Crowfall
This month
Played an MMO where the world is always ending. Real escapist stuff, eh?



JEREMY PEEL
Specialist in
Green energy
Currently playing
Orcs Must Die! 3
This month
Wrote yet more words about *Orcs Must Die* to add to his body of work on the subject. Weirdo.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Japanese law
Currently playing
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles
This month
Dared to call an *Ace Attorney* game 'too dramatic'.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Protecting what's his
Currently playing
Vedelem: The Golden Horde
This month
Found that university is good for more than just freshers' week.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Fowl language
Currently playing
Untitled Goose Game
This month
Dared to suggest that honking at pensioners isn't as fun as it looks.

SOMETHING NEW...

OLD WORLD is a historical 4X that feels like the future.

By Fraser Brown

The story of my first campaign in *Old World*, where I led my Greek civilisation to global domination, is equally the story of Rome, my nemesis. When I first encountered the Romans, they were friendly, offering us goodies and hospitality, but it was a poisoned chalice – quite literally. A sickness spread, and Roman gifts were the source. I demanded justice and compensation; Rome only wanted war. It would take nearly 200 years until I got my revenge.

It was not a single continuous war, but rather an eternal grudge. The first conflict ended without much resolution, with the distance between our empires and the massive mountain chain that separated us creating some logistical difficulties. There were still battles, certainly, costing both of us more than soldiers. Family members, revered generals and close friends also lost their lives. Between the wars were heated diplomatic meetings and espionage, which again cost lives. RIP Confucius, philosopher-turned-spy.

Despite using the language of *Civilization* – from workers to wonders – it should be starting to become clear that Soren Johnson and Mohawk Games' take on the historical 4X formula is quite different to Firaxis's approach. There are many similarities, which should not be a surprise given that Johnson was also the lead designer of *Civ 4*, but *Old World* feels like a meaningful evolution. And a welcome one.

The most notable advancement is the importance placed on people. Like *Crusader Kings*, you are not an immortal ruler... Your famous starting ruler will eventually die. When Philip

II left this mortal coil, the empire passed to his son, Alexander, who'd become known as Alexander the Noble – sadly he didn't do enough to earn the 'Great' moniker. You've got heirs and succession laws to

worry about, as well as a court full of potential friends and enemies.

Old World feels like a meaningful evolution, and a welcome one

COURTING TROUBLE

These courtiers, generals and other folk grow and react, increasing their attributes to become more disciplined or charismatic while also picking up traits like 'wanton' and 'schemer.' They have affairs, illegitimate children, and can plot the demise of other characters, including the ruler. In the mid-game, I found myself playing a talented king, beloved by his people and the triumvirate of influential families constantly vying

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based 4X that's part *Civilization*, part *Crusader Kings*.

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Mohawk Games

PUBLISHER
Mohawk Games

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
mohawkgames.com/oldworld

for power and attention. His uncle, however, was not a fan. Years before, when I was playing as his father, I encouraged certain unpleasant traits in my son, which benefited me at the time. I had no idea I was creating a nephew-killer. When it came time to reap what I'd sowed, I had some regrets.

Much of this plays out through event pop-ups, typically giving you multiple options that depend on your traits and resources. You get to decide how children are educated, how you react to a diplomatic insult, or what to do with the possibly magical sword that was just dug up – I opted for starting a cult and charging them admission to see the fancy blade.

Often, you won't see the impact for years, so there's always a surprise around the corner. This contributes to a sense that you are truly shaping your own civilisation, and in ways that go beyond changing some stats.

If only the UI did a good job of keeping track of this. It can be jarring to go from the flavourful event text to the abstract, soulless numbers that the UI boils them down to. Every interaction is made a bit worse because it requires faffing around in counter-intuitive menus that drag you all over the screen. Even after winning my first campaign, I still found myself getting lost, and I still don't know how to find crucial information on things like the spread of religion. The tutorial and

ORIGIN STORY Old World's civs and original leaders



1 Assyria starts with the religious Ashurbanipal and gets unique battering rams and siege towers.



2 Babylonia begins with scholarly Nebuchadnezzar ruling and boasts Akkadian and Cimmerian Archers.



3 Diplomatic Dido leads Carthage, which can field a pair of rather intimidating African elephant units.



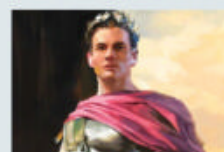
4 Egypt begins with the construction-minded Hatshepsut and gets Light Chariots and Kushite Cavalry.



5 Militant Philip leads Greece, which can recruit Hoplites and Phalangites, unique infantry units.



6 Persia is led by the heroic Cyrus and defended by the likes of Palaton Cavalry and Cataphract Archers.



7 Rome starts with Romulus the tactician and can field Hastati and the iconic Legionaries.

Expect to go through a few rulers across the two centuries.



FAR LEFT: Cities start off small, but can grow into sprawling behemoths.

LEFT: Tyrants have more fun.

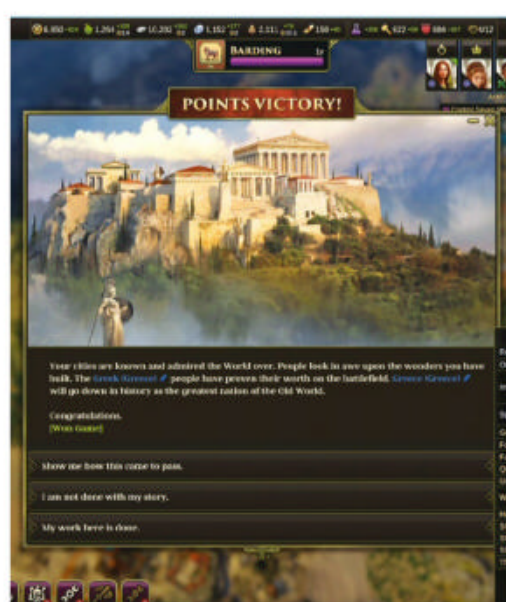


You'd never know this happy family is hiding a few murderers.



ABOVE: Is that pyramid very small or is that elephant very big?

FAR RIGHT: Events add personality to your empire.



BELOW: Things aren't looking good for Ponus Aelius.



encyclopedia are of little help, choosing brevity and vagueness over clear instructions. There's much more context and clarity in the event text, so I wish *Old World's* writers were more involved in designing the interface, which could definitely benefit from their skills.

Alone, the events and characters would have been enough to grab my attention. *Civilization* and *Crusader Kings* are two of the greats, and combining their philosophies leads to a game that feels tailor made to my interests. But *Old World* is filled with new ideas and ways of doing things.

ON THE MARCH

Every unit has a specific movement range and room for one action per turn, but without 'orders' they can't do anything, and those are limited. As you start expanding and fielding more units, you'll find yourself having to prioritise so that you don't find your tank is empty right when you're about to make a critical move. It's a complication, but sometimes it can actually take the pressure off you.

Orders are tied to legitimacy, another abstract resource. You improve the legitimacy of your reign by mostly being insular, promoting national unity and the people of your civilization above all else. This can mean that you treat foreigners with suspicion and take a 'strong' stance that will make the rest of the world rightly think you're a dickhead. It reflects how real leaders can fan the flames of national fervour and encourage small-minded attitudes.

You can, thankfully, still be an effective ruler without pandering to the worst aspects of national identity. Some buildings – which, I should

add, are constructed by workers rather than from the city menu, letting you embark on several construction projects at the same time – generate small amounts of legitimacy that can give you a big boost. That's something *Old World* excels at: giving you more ways to achieve objectives. Resource management is another example. On

The focus on people benefits the diplomacy system immensely

top of the abstract stuff, there's also more tangible resources like stone, iron, wood, and gold, which are required for trade and, more importantly, construction. It's a hungry game that demands a healthy

stockpile. If you're running low, however, you can spend gold to buy more; if you're out of gold, you can sell whatever abundance you have.

When your larder is looking sparse, you can also seek help from fellow rulers. The focus on people benefits the diplomacy system immensely, as these are personal relationships that you're developing. Friendships with foreign leaders can be undone by the way an event plays out, but as always there are plenty of opportunities to repair the damage.

DO-OVER

If diplomacy fails, you might find yourself heading to war. Combat is one of the places that feels most evocative of modern *Civilization*, which is unfortunate, because I'm getting a bit bored of moving all these units around one by one, surrounding cities and battering enemies. That's not to say it hasn't been improved... For one, there's the undo move (or even turn) ability, which is a blessing. You'll never find yourself making mistakes from a misclick or miscalculation. You can also recruit

generals from your court, which may have handy abilities, like being able to heal units even in neutral territory.

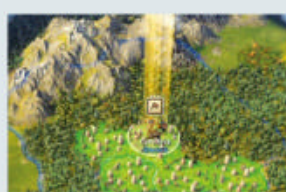
Throughout my time with *Old World* I kept coming across things that made me think, "why hasn't *Civ* done this?" It has solutions to many 4X niggles that have been around for ages. Take research, for instance. When you choose your next research project, the game produces a few offerings from a deck made up of all the stuff you're ready to discover. So instead of picking from the same list over and over again, it's slightly randomised, and alongside new techs are bonus cards that give you gifts, like a free unit. If you're in the middle of a war, do you really care about unlocking the magical power of mills? Instead, you can spend a turn or two on getting a free spearman.

It's a shame it peters out towards the end. The simplest method of winning is by earning 52 points before 200 years pass, which you do by nurturing your cities and building wonders. If nobody gets to 52, the highest wins. You can also get an early win if you double the points of the next nation, but only if you're already halfway to 52. Then there's the Ambition victory, where you win if you manage to complete ten personal goals. If you don't finish them in your life, they become legacy goals that your heir can complete. Finally, you can wipe everyone out. It's a bit perfunctory, and quite gamey. I was lucky that my first win happened as I conquered my nemesis Rome, because without that it wouldn't have been memorable.

Despite its understated victories, *Old World* is a brilliant 4X, and one that I'd suggest over *Civilization*. It feels like a step forward for the genre, boasting so many inventive, smart design decisions. And I can't believe I've reached the end of the review before mentioning the soundtrack from composer Christopher Tin. *Civ 4's* Baba Yetu might still be my favourite of his pieces, but *Old World* is full of evocative orchestral and choral compositions. There's a lot to love here, and if you've got an itch to conquer the ancient world you need to give this a go. ■



URBAN PLANNING How Old World cities are born



GET STARTED

Cities can only be built in certain places, making the race to expand more tense. It also means you won't end up somewhere awful.



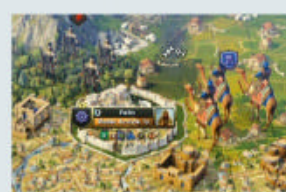
CHOOSE A LEADER

Every city has a ruling family that you get to pick. Each family has its own focus and interests, like construction or warfare.



EXPAND

Cities are used to recruit units, but construction is done by workers that develop tiles around them, erecting various buildings.



CLAIM VICTORY

Each city has a points value, depending on its size, and together with wonders contribute to your total victory points.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A clever spiritual successor to *Civilization* full of both novelties and big ideas, but a few (minor) wrinkles.

87

RISE ABOVE

THE ASCENT is a quality action-RPG set in a mind-blowing cyberpunk city

By Andy Kelly

Along with thousands of other galactic migrants, your character in *The Ascent* pays a small fortune for a ticket to the planet Veles, looking for a better life. The moment you step off the ship, however, the price of the ticket becomes a debt so astronomical that you'll die before you can pay it off.

Even so, the company that owns the city you now call home, the Ascent Group, wants its pound of flesh. You are now an indent – slang for an indentured servant – working dirty, dangerous jobs to pay it off.

The Ascent's setting, a mix of neon-flecked '80s cyberpunk and grimy science fiction, is magnificent. The story takes place in an Arcology – a self-contained city squeezed into an immense skyscraper.

Think Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, crossed with Akira's Neo Tokyo, and populated by the aliens from the Mos Eisley cantina. It's an urban crush of tight-knit markets, bustling plazas, and concrete valleys buzzing with streams of flying cars.

It's a hell of a setting, and one of the most compelling cyberpunk worlds on PC. But what do you

actually do in it? Well, *The Ascent* is an action-RPG, with an emphasis on the *action*, that you can play alone or with up to three friends in co-op.

It's a gloriously chunky, brutal isometric shooter where you run around that gorgeous city blowing enemies away with shotguns and churning them into a fine bloody mist

with rattly machine-guns. Loot, money, and power-ups sprinkle out of their corpses, and scooping these up provides a constant stream of tiny, pleasing dopamine hits.

Loot comes in the form of weapons and

various bits of cyberpunk-themed armour to play dress-up with, including glowing visors and mechanical limbs.

Playing with a mouse and keyboard, it's WASD to move, mouse to aim. With a gamepad, it's a

One of the most compelling cyberpunk worlds on PC

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cyberpunk action-RPG with guns, lots of guns

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Neon Giant

PUBLISHER
Curve Digital

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
curve-digital.com

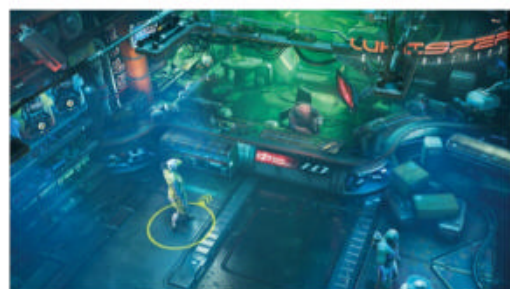
twin-stick shooter. Both work well, but the extra precision of the mouse aiming just clinched it for me.

Crouch behind something and you can raise your gun with the left trigger or the right mouse button, shooting over the top of whichever chunk of debris you happen to be squatting near. If you double tap the spacebar (or A button) you can evade enemies with a fast roll. All these elements combine to create a really great-feeling shooter that involves more than just pointing and blasting.

UP AND COMING

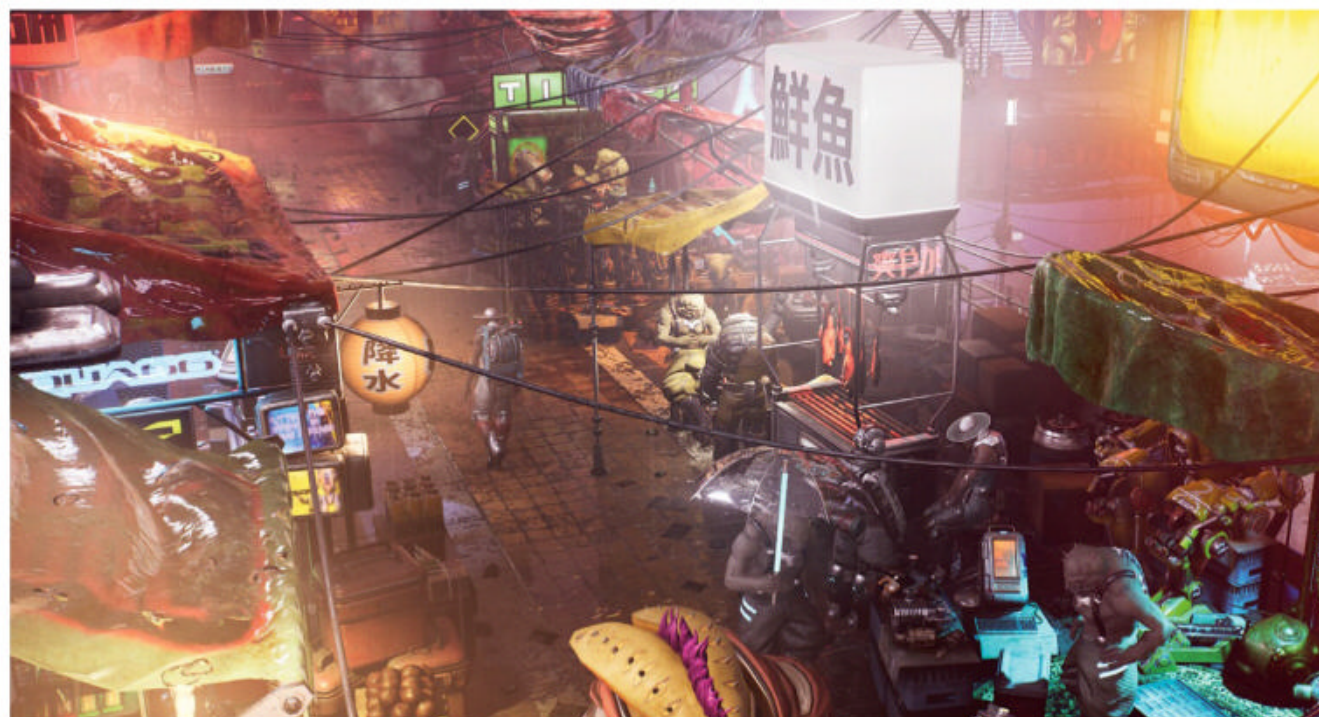
Don't be fooled by the existence of a cover system: the relentless rhythm of *The Ascent's* combat forces you to be in near-constant motion. Gun-toting enemies are accompanied by large groups of melee grunts. They push forward aggressively, never giving you a chance to get settled or get too comfortable behind cover.

When you begin the game, your lowly indent is working a job in the Deepstink, the lowest part of the city. But as you make a name for yourself, working as a mercenary for an influential crime boss, you find yourself rising to the top – literally.



TOP: The level of detail is incredibly impressive.

RIGHT: One of the many busy, crowded marketplaces in the Arcology.





The game often treats you to a stunning view of the city.



ABOVE: Gamblers throwing their money away in the Golden Satori casino.



FAR RIGHT: Enemies come in all shapes and sizes, including bloody massive.

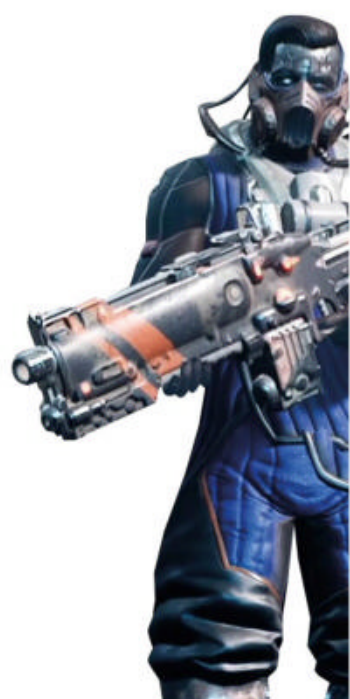
The story takes you from the stinking depths of the Arcology to increasingly higher, more opulent levels, all of which have a very different aesthetic and vibe.

This is fundamentally a game about shooting lots of people dead, including gangsters, corporate soldiers, and hulking mechs. But there are some quiet moments too. In crowded social hubs you can shop, talk to NPCs, and pick up sidequests without fear of being attacked.

I had issues with sudden, sharp difficulty spikes, some of which forced me to break off from the story and grind sidequests to level up. I wouldn't mind this if the sidequests were consistently good, but I found them pretty hit and miss.

Some keep you hooked with a good story. But others feel a little like busywork, with a lot of walking long distances between districts.

But whenever the game does something to disappoint me, the world always wins me back. From the lavish Golden Satori casino to the bleak Black Lake slums, this is a masterclass in creating a sense of place. *The Ascent* is a superb shooter elevated by a great setting. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

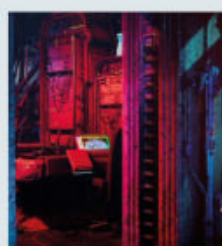
A lovingly crafted action-RPG with satisfying gunfights and an exceptional cyberpunk setting.

84



CITY SLICKER

The Arcology's coolest locations



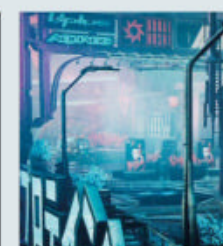
CODER'S COVE

An underground hacker's lair, hidden away in the flooded Black Lake district. You'll find all kinds of shady characters.



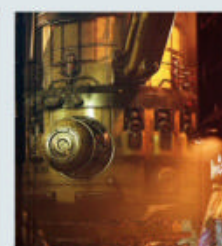
CLUSTER 13

A cramped collection of habitation pods, which are tiny apartments. There are some great dive bars here.



HIGHSTREET

A busy commercial district, lit up by thousands of neon billboards and protected by security guards and mechs.



DEEPSTINK

The bowels of the Arcology. A mess of pipes and machinery, with giant insect-like robots maintaining the place.

LONDON CALLING

Four Londoners are about to have a very bad day in narrative adventure **LAST STOP**

By Andy Kelly

Last Stop is a game about extraordinary things happening to ordinary people. Set on the streets of London, it follows four very different characters – John, Jack, Donna, and Meena – whose unremarkable lives are suddenly touched by the supernatural. It's an offbeat mix of the mundane and the fantastic, where one minute you're making a cup of tea, and the next you're tumbling through a portal into another dimension.

It's also one of the most authentic depictions of Britain I've seen in a videogame – a realistic, setting that makes those moments when things turn magical seem extra uncanny.

Last Stop is a linear narrative game. You tell the characters what to say in conversations, occasionally move them through heavily choreographed scenes, and not much else. In this sense, as a game, it's very limited in scope. The interaction is minimal and, in most cases, largely meaningless – to the point where I wish I could just sit and enjoy the story without having to lift the controller to eat a bowl of cereal.

Last Stop has the feel of an anthology, telling three loosely linked stories that eventually intersect in

the final chapter. John and Jack's tale is the most fun, like a goofy episode of The Twilight Zone. John is a middle-aged single dad with heart problems, working a civil service job he hates. Jack is an upbeat, fitness-loving videogame developer in his 20s. And for reasons far too convoluted to get into, their brains are swapped.

The pair coming to terms with this, and trying to live each other's lives, is the source of some great comedy. But it hits

some powerful emotional beats too, particularly where John's health and his daughter Molly are involved.

Meanwhile, schoolgirl Donna and her friends follow a mysterious man to a derelict swimming pool, discover he has supernatural powers, and end

It has a knack for telling small, human stories that feel genuine

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A magical realism adventure game set in the city of London

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Variable State

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
variablestate.com

up holding him hostage after an unfortunate incident with a lead pipe.

This story isn't as compelling. I was never really clear why they were keeping this guy tied up. But Donna's relationship and family troubles are much more interesting. Weird magic stuff aside, Last Stop has a knack for telling small, human stories that feel genuine and natural. I was invested in Donna's unrequited love and her anxiety over her mother's illness.

Meena is the least ordinary of the gang, being an ex-soldier working for a technology company with a lucrative military contract. But I love that this aspect of her life is not the main focus of her story – rather, an affair she's having with a doctor makes up the bulk of it.

You have to navigate her through a rocky marriage, a son who wishes she was around more and a young upstart vying for her job. Meena is the best character in the game: she's tough, cynical, egotistical, selfish and mostly unapologetic about it.

OFF THE RAILS

When the three stories finally collide, Last Stop shifts in tone so sharply you'll wonder if you're playing the



TOP: Yes, that chip shop is called The Codfather.

RIGHT: John and Jack before their brains get swapped.





Donna's story involves the kidnap of a weird, magical stranger.



ABOVE: A little too authentic a recreation of a dreary office job.



FAR RIGHT: Meena's relationship with her dad is a story highlight.

same game. The wild final chapter is an enjoyable, unexpected ending for sure, but so outlandish that I couldn't help but feel that it slightly cheapened the nuanced, heartfelt drama leading up to it.

I just wish there was more to it. The QTE-style interactions feel clumsy, and I never got the sense that I was actually controlling the characters. There's no tactile feeling to the interactions, whether you're tapping the bumpers to sprint or rotating a stick to stir a mug of tea.

Last Stop is one of the least satisfying narrative games I've played recently in terms of the mechanics underpinning everything. It's really basic stuff, even compared to early Telltale games, where you at least got the chance to snuffle around the environments for extra flavour. But everything else – the engaging plot, the stylish presentation, the sublime orchestral score – are all superb.

If you're happy just to be told an entertaining, if not entirely interactive, story in a realistic depiction of contemporary London, with a little spooky magic sprinkled in, there's a lot here to love. Just brace yourself for that ending. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Last Stop is a smart, funny, heartfelt narrative game that tells a killer story, but doesn't do much beyond that.

70



COR BLIMEY

Other games that get the UK right



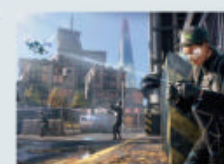
FORZA HORIZON 4

This open-world racer features a massively condensed, weirdly mapped out version of the UK, but the small details are all bang-on.



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

If you've ever been to any small rural village in England, the setting for this haunting apocalyptic narrative game will be familiar.



WATCH DOGS LEGION

It's set in the near future, but Ubisoft's dystopian London features an impressively accurate, almost street-perfect London replica.



ZOMBI

This survival horror game is set in a zombie-ravaged London, and it captures the look and feel of the city brilliantly. Even the shambling, groaning crowds are spot on...

NUCLEAR OPTIONS

CHERNOBYLITE is a rare game that makes you feel the weight of your decisions

By Robert Zak

Chernobylite is a curious mash-up of ideas orbiting around a pretty stiff first-person shooter framework. But it feels more inviting thanks to its evocative setting and cast of grizzled scavengers. Despite some shortcomings, it succeeds as a game about choice, where you're constantly faced with quandaries that may meaningfully affect the hero Igor's journey as he chases spectral visions of his wife around the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Killing a sketchy character early on might lead to an awkward impasse with his wife later, split-second decisions about whether or not to save stalkers from patrolling army guards will dictate how many allies and enemies you have in the Zone, and at every key point you'll have companions radioing in to persuade you to do stuff.

Each time you die, you wake up in a dreamscape where you can see how the key decisions you made are connected, and go back and change those decisions using mysterious *Chernobylite* shards as payment to whatever interdimensional god-force is running the show.

It's pretty ballsy for a game to lay bare its choice system like this, but

given the breadth of *Chernobylite*'s web of choices, the devs have every right to want to show it off.

Between missions you hang out in your base, where you can cook, build improvements, explore other peoples' memories based on clues you find, or

even just go straight to the Heist mission at the end of the game. When you're ready, you pick a mission set in one of six regions around the Zone – where you can progress the main story or search for clues. At the same time, you can

send out your companions to scout future missions or gather resources.

PRACTICALLY GLOWING

These maps aren't huge, but they look wonderful. But it's a shame that there's not more going on in these

Combat gets a bit tangled between shooter, stealth, and RPG

finely crafted areas. The only things you find are resources and clues relating to Igor's story, there is no wildlife and enemy AI rigidly sticks to their patrol routes – never sitting at desks or fighting radioactive monsters or having a wee.

The combat gets a bit tangled between realistic shooter, stealth, and RPG. Beyond a rather pathetic side-dash, there are no mechanics like sliding or cover-firing, while leaping over obstacles is semi-functional at best.

Thankfully, stealth is a viable approach, so I upgraded my revolver with a silencer and became a master of silent takedowns. Again though, this feels a little threadbare as you can't hide bodies. It all speaks to a combat system that's stretched between multiple styles without particularly excelling in any of them.

What really gives *Chernobylite* its soul are the people you recruit to your base. There are five in total, each with their traumas, missions, and stories to tell. I grew particularly fond of Mikhail, always blaring like a drill sergeant about everything from boozy tales, to tarot readings, to an anecdote about radioactive sausages

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A non-linear shooter with a focus on survival and player choice

EXPECT TO PAY
£31.50

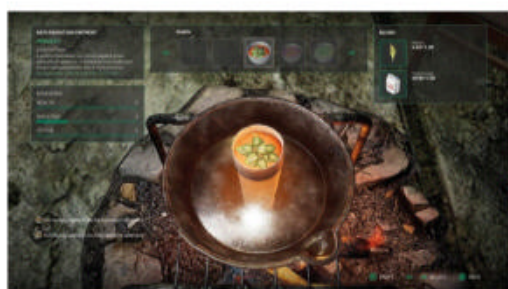
DEVELOPER
The Farm 51

PUBLISHER
All in! Games SA

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
chernobylgame.com



ABOVE: Apparently tomato soup is a robust cure for radiation poisoning.



Your decisions may have long-reaching consequences – such as whether a character wants to kill or ally with you.



Before each mission, you can assign your companions to fetch food, ammo, and other supplies.



ABOVE: The Farm 51's 3D scanning wizardry makes each of the six areas ripple with realism.

FAR RIGHT: Don't let the occasional jump-scare and jittery ghost-thing fool you into thinking this is a horror game.

distributed throughout the Soviet Union. It's solid, engaging writing, though I recommend using the Russian audio with subs unless you want Igor to push his voice like an over-eager Oxford academic.

There are a few half-baked quirks in *Chernobylite* that seem to exist to tick certain boxes. It's been termed 'survival horror', but monster encounters are scarce, and beyond that the very occasional jump-scare, creepy doll, or hallucination of a jittery man in a gas mask doesn't really justify the label. Similarly, the Black Stalker who beams himself into maps on a timer in later missions is more a nuisance than a threat when you realise he's rooted to the spot and can be blasted away. Mr X he most definitely is not.

Maybe *Chernobylite* latches onto these recognisable tropes because its greatest strengths aren't easily conveyed through trailers or genre tags. Its cast of characters and its choice system are genuinely gripping, while its depiction of the Zone is at times breathtaking.

Like its motley crew of mad companions, *Chernobylite* is a misfit that I can't help but like. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Chernobylite is an ambitious and atmospheric adventure undercut by some simplistic mechanics.

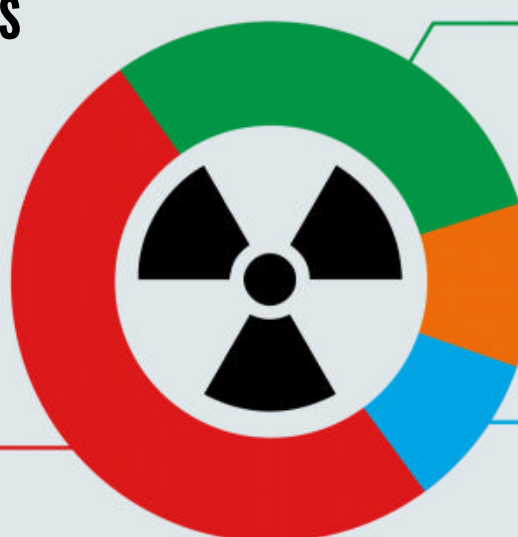
78



MUTATIONS

Chernobylite dabbles in many genres – how much should you expect of each?

50% STORY-DRIVEN
The main story is enjoyably pulpy sci-fi.



30% SURVIVAL
There's not a huge amount of stuff to beautify your rusting hangar.

10% HORROR
A couple of hours in, it seems to give up on its own horror clichés.

10% RPG
Labels itself an RPG on the Steam page, but it's basic.

AS THE CROW FLIES

There's a good PvP game in **CROWFALL**, but it only thrives under specific conditions

By Robert Zak

Six years on from its very successful Kickstarter campaign, *Crowfall* has landed. The throne-war MMO was touted as many things during that time, including a claim by its designer that by launch it would be the “most strategic virtual universe (IMO surpassing *Eve Online*)”.

So let's just reset expectations by saying that *Crowfall* most definitely isn't that. What it is is a guild-based PvP game with a heavy focus on economy. You'll be creating multiple characters sharing your account name, then levelling them quickly so that they can become cogs in a machine, helping your guild gain ground in the perpetual throne war.

It all starts, as so many MMOS do, with character creation. Here you have your classic elven variations, mythological minotaurs and centaurs, as well as more original imaginings like the statuesque Stoneborn and Elken... who look like elks.

PIGGING OUT

The character creator gives you a good feel for the art style here. Some may like it, but for me these flat-textured character models lack facial flair, making them look a bit dim like that drooling *Clash of Clans* mascot you see in unwanted mobile ads.

The exception are the charming Guineceans, a race of stout guineapig-folk with a penchant for burrowing underground. I opted for the Duelist class, making my piggy a specialist in dual-wielding pistols.

Satisfied with my selection, I was ready to dive in... or so I thought.

Because before you engage in the game proper, you have to cut your teeth in the God's Reach starting world until level 25 (the hard cap is 35). It will take you a good eight-plus

hours to get through its painfully protracted questline. You learn some vital things along the way, but too much of your time is spent on uninteresting fetch quests for ungrateful and unvoiced NPCs.

You don't have to worry about PvP or partying up until you hit 25, but that brings into relief how empty the game world feels without those elements. There are buildings and villages in the world, but no lore tidbits, chatty NPCs, or meaningful

These flat-textured character models lack facial flair

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An MMO centred around PvP, siegecraft, and economy

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
ArtCraft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
crowfall.com

loot within them, nor are there spontaneous sidequests out in the wilderness to break up your odyssey to the core of the game.

At least your time in this most purgatorial of tutorials lets you get used to the combat. It's your classic hotkey-and-cooldown-based setup, ostensibly leaning towards a more 'action game' style by removing auto-attack, adding 'reflex' moves like dodges and jumps, and implementing a manual targeting system over traditional MMO tab targeting.

But these technicalities seem a little arbitrary when dodging has a long cooldown, your only non-hotkey weapon attack is executed by holding down the mouse button, and hitboxes are so vague that you can shoot the general airspace around an enemy and still score a hit. The combat lacks the kind of crunchy physicality you see in *Black Desert Online* or even *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

Once you hit 25, you can head out into the PvP wildlands of the starting world, or jump over into the guild-vs-guild 'Dregs' world. But travelling between worlds isn't that simple – it involves a lot of logging out, logging in, and stripping your character down to their undies.

See, to move between worlds you have to deposit whatever you want to take over in the bank, exit back to the game menu, spend some of a finite number of 'import tokens' to move items into your bank vault in the new world, sign into the new world, then retrieve those items from the bank.

All this makes *Crowfall* feel fragmented – a feeling exacerbated by low player numbers and the fact that all areas within a world are connected by portals rather than, say, mountain passes or rivers. Each area feels flat too – thin forests amidst stumbling hills with no geologically imposing terrain. This is probably a side-effect of the fact that most of the lands are procedurally generated and disposable, getting destroyed when a campaign ends.

IS CROWFALL FOR YOU?

It might be! What kind of MMO player are you?

LONE WANDERER

You want to be immersed in a fantasy world filled with interesting stories and sidequests, without the threat of other players killing you in cold blood.



PVP JUNKIE

There's no thrill quite for you quite like testing your might against other players – whether it's unexpected skirmishes while out hunting or epic-scale siege warfare.



PVE GROUPIE

Levelling up, exploring mysterious new lands, and befriending strangers who you'll need to coordinate with to take down enemy mobs and earn that loot.



SOCIALITE

MMOs for you are more about the bonding with guildmates and shared memories than innovative mechanics or tear-jerkingly beautiful graphics.



Once you capture a fort, you need to plan how you're going to protect it.



FAR LEFT: The map shows you which guilds controls which territory, Hot Zones, and countdowns to siege events.

LEFT: *Crowfall's* procedurally generated maps feel somewhat flat and lifeless.



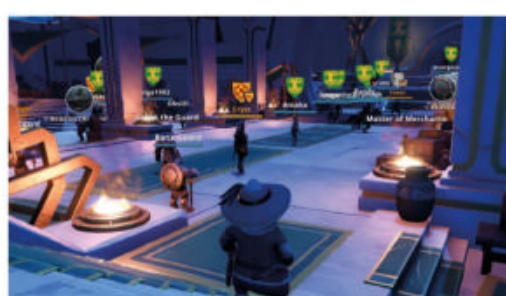
BELOW: Combat uses a manual targeting system with quite possibly the biggest hitboxes in the world.



Crowfall spreads some thin semblance of story throughout the Starter World campaign.



RIGHT: The temple of your respective faction is a hub where you can trade, craft, and kick back.



FAR RIGHT: Crowfall's fragmented worlds contain multiple areas, all of which are connected by portals.



BELOW: In the Dregs world, you and your guild fight over outposts, forts, and keeps.



END OF THE WORLDS

Which brings us onto one of the game's more interesting systems. Each world exists for only a limited period of time (between a month and a year). The worlds go through the seasons, starting in springtime with the map enshrouded in a fog of war as players learn the lay of the land, before progressing through increasingly dangerous seasons and culminating in a cosmic cataclysm.

Your characters survive, while guilds and factions that meet the victory conditions get rewards to carry over to the new campaign. But the world, along with all the territory ownership, dies forever. It's an original way to keep things fresh, even if there's a certain inevitability that dominant guilds from the previous campaign will quickly establish a stranglehold over the new one. To offset that imbalance there is an alliance system, whereby smaller guilds can join bigger ones in sharing the spoils.

From level 25, you're going to be spending most of your time in PvP territory, so the first thing you should do is join a guild if you ever want to see the key content of the game. After that, you can start specialising.

Upon levelling up, you alternate between improving your basic attributes and picking a 'Talent' to progress your skill tree. There's plenty of room to experiment here. Beyond the usual mix of passive and active abilities, you go down two different layers of sub-class. Clerics, for instance, are typically healers, but you can eventually turn them into a damage-dealing Radical, a crowd-controlling Arbiter, or heal-centric Crusader. Then, at the end of the skill tree, you can specialise further using 'Domains' like Death, Shadow, and Music, unlocking various high-level abilities. Meta players and class tinkerers will appreciate the depth here, especially given that the journey from tutorial to PvP endgame is an unusually brisk one.

Link up with a good PvE hunting group in Dregs, and you can get from level 25 to 30 in just a few hours. PvE focuses around clearing villages or camps of monsters, with the occasional group or raid boss thrown in. This straightforward loop is spiced up by 'Hot Zones' –

highlighted areas where for short periods of time you can get XP boosts and better loot drops, at the risk of being ambushed by enemy players hunting for those same rewards.

The threat of PvP intervention always hangs over you in *Crowfall*, which is either thrilling or frustrating depending on the context. It's great when your group fends off an

ambush from an enemy group, and larger-scale sieges are always a blast. On the other hand, it's not nearly as fun to get stampeded and looted by a player mob when you're out chopping trees on your lonesome. Lucky for

me, my plucky Guinecean Duelist has the ability to burrow underground and move undetected, making him perfect for solo harvesting and recon missions sniffing out nearby enemies.

The most significant form of progression in *Crowfall* is 'Disciplines'. These replaceable stones are split into Major, Minor, and Exploration (essentially crafting/harvesting), and come in different forms of rarity that define how powerful they are. Craftsfolk should expect to spend long hours in the wilderness chopping trees or smashing stones to get the respective harvesting disciplines, while combat-based major and minor disciplines drop off particular kinds

The threat of PvP intervention always hangs over you

SHATTERED WORLDS

The three kinds of realm in Crowfall



PLAYER WORLDS ETERNAL KINGDOMS

Using similar tools to the developers when they procedurally generate maps at the start of each campaign, players can create their own worlds with their own rulesets. These could be trading villages where you can buy rare items, guild strongholds, or PvP battlefields.



STARTING WORLDS GOD'S REACH

The place where you're forced to spend your first 25 levels. The areas surrounding the Earth, Moon, and Sun Temples are PvE only, but if you want to gain meaningful loot and start farming for Disciplines, you'll need to head out into one of the PvP lands in this world.



GUILD VS GUILD DREGS

Several lands where guilds fight over forts, keeps, and outposts. These worlds are time-limited by their campaigns, with guild-based victory conditions that offer rewards to guilds that meet them. Once the campaign ends, the world ends, and new campaigns with new lands replace them.

of monsters – after a whole lot of grinding, of course. I appreciate the ability to freely swap these in and out to find which combinations work best in given situations.

GUILD ME UP

Crowfall at its best when you're part of a well organised guild. Each land in *Crowfall* is speckled with forts, keeps, and outposts to scrap over. While outposts can be captured any time, forts and keeps can only be contested at specific times and days.

The battles over these structures can be vast, though they do tend to boil down to those familiar PvP siege patterns of madly spamming hotkeys to drop overlapping circles of AoE abilities all around you. The vaunted manual targeting system is all but negated when you have 40-plus characters on-screen fighting each other, and it still feels like MMO siegecraft hasn't meaningfully moved on from the seminal foundations laid by *Dark Age of Camelot* in 2001.

Perhaps my favourite part of *Crowfall* comes in the afterglow of capturing a Keep. There's an air of camaraderie as everyone does their little part in building it back up; setting up a guild vault where players can deposit gear for others to use, erecting respawn and blessing statues, building walls and mounting trebuchets, and gathering resources for those all-important master craftspeople. As the days count down to your new holding becoming unlocked for others to siege, this camaraderie mixes in with escalating suspense among your comrades.

There's something to be said for an MMO that's so rigidly designed around doing your part for the collective. But the conditions for getting to that point in *Crowfall* are stringent, and if you fail to meet them then there's little to distract you from the awkward world design and rote mechanics.

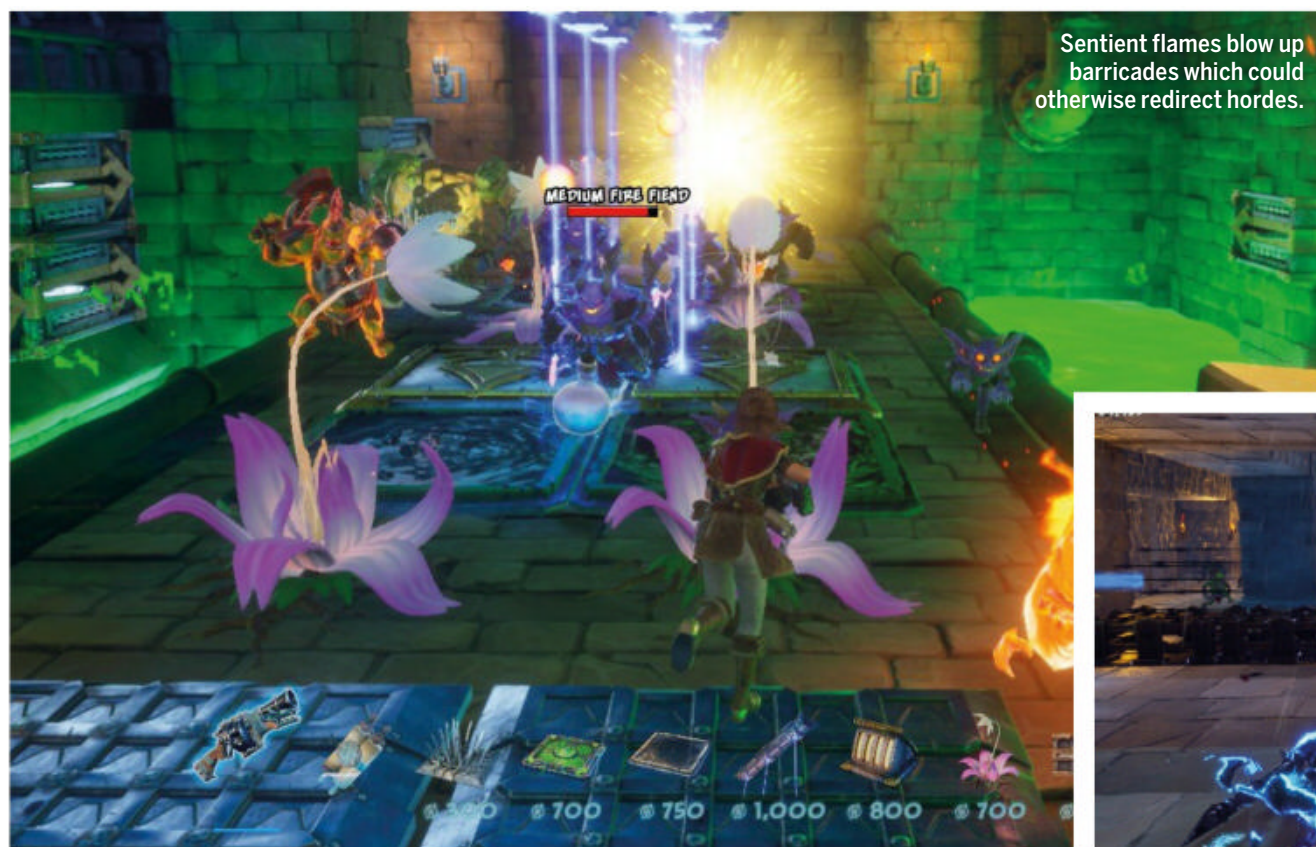
At its best, *Crowfall* is a solid PvP MMO with a good throne war system and deep character progression, but it's light years away from the player-shaped *EVE Online* beater it was championed as during development. Shame. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A deep but fragmented throne-war MMO that's not nearly as original as its early promise suggested.

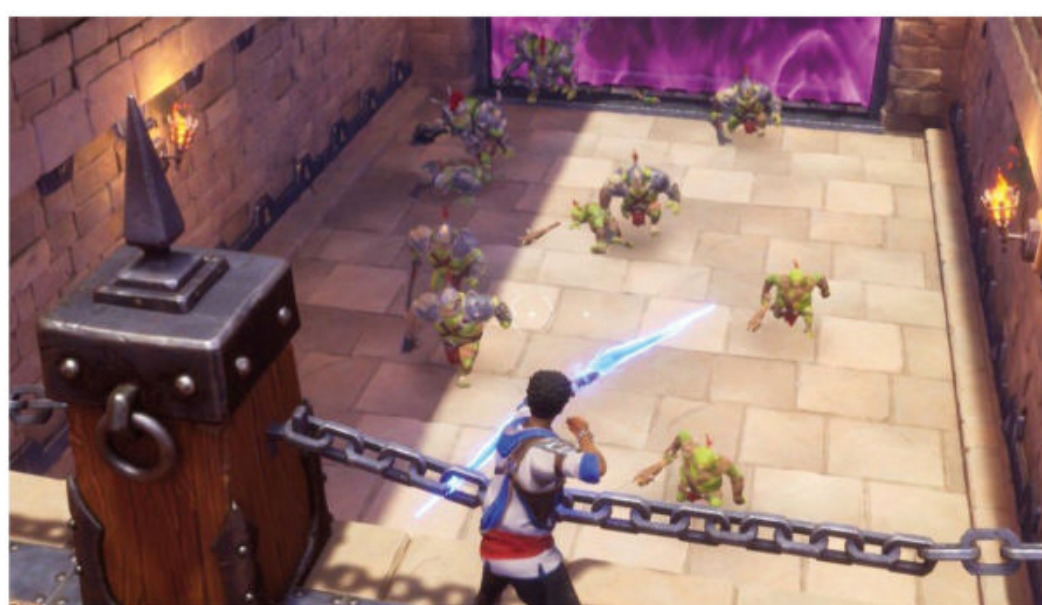
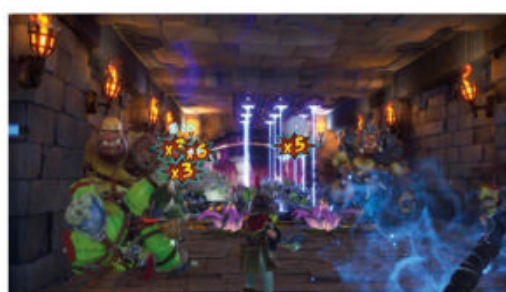
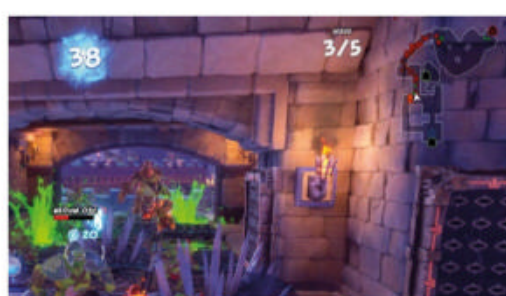
64



FAR RIGHT: Aim slightly higher than you'd expect for those headshots.

RIGHT: It's easy to get overwhelmed if you're not prepared.

BELOW: Earth Lords split apart into smaller, faster rock bastards.



MAGED WELL

Action tower defence comes home in **ORCS MUST DIE! 3**

By Jeremy Peel

Just occasionally, as a new wave of orcs washes in to crash against your fortifications, you'll catch a moan from a greenskin on the breeze, "Feels like we're never gonna get there." If your enemy is on the verge of a galaxy brain realisation about their doomed role in tower defence, however, they never get to complete the thought: they're invariably dashed against the rocks, tarred and burned, or electrified so that their skeleton flashes through their skin.

Orcs Must Die! 3 isn't a thoughtful fantasy game, in that sense: it makes little effort to contextualise its maligned title characters, to ponder where they come from or why they do what they do. Yet it is a thinking person's game – a strategic siege simulator that rewards careful arrangement, inspired solutions, and a willingness to toss away past assumptions and approach a problem from a new angle. It's a game that makes you feel smart, even as you swing your mouse desperately to slug an imp in the eye with a bolt of magic.

Imagine you're an interior designer, but in a universe where one of the tenets of feng shui is murder. Using a budget, you begin each level by buying, rotating, and placing the traps of your choice in a small dungeon (or, less often, a large field), with the aim of causing as much damage as possible to any orcs who might pass through.

Then it's open house: the doors smash inward, and enemies run down the hall and up the stairs, displaying a remarkably low aptitude for hazard perception as they do so. The traps they trigger come from the Tom & Jerry school of slapstick comedy, flipping orcs through the air or stinging them with beehives; those awaiting the upcoming Jackass reunion will find themselves well served. Afterwards, with all the orcs dead or absconded through the portal you're supposed to be protecting, you go again – building out your designs until the final wave.

On the whole, combat is best described as mash and peas

ORC WARD

In a traditional tower defence game, the arrival of the action phase would be your prompt to sit back, take in the scene, and grit your teeth – hoping your walls will hold, and throwing down an extra turret or two when funds allow. In *Orcs Must Die! 3*, it's the moment to roll up the sleeves of your gown and jump in. On the whole, combat is best

described as mash and peas – in that it offers mainly button mashing melee and peashooter projectiles. There's less complexity or

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**
A tower defence game where you slaughter orcs
- EXPECT TO PAY**
£24.80
- DEVELOPER**
Robot Entertainment
- PUBLISHER**
In-House
- REVIEWED ON**
Windows 10, Intel Core i5-6500, 8GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060
- MULTIPLAYER**
Yes
- LINK**
robotentertainment.com/omd3

opportunity for skill than you'd find in a dedicated action game, but that's for the best. If the fighting were any more involved, it would pull too much focus, upsetting the balance of this classic genre hybrid. Robot Entertainment has been making *Orcs Must Die!* for a long time, and knows not to mess with the fundamentals. Not least because the last time the studio tried that, with the live service *Orcs Must Die! Unchained*, the mixture exploded in its face.

Yep, *Orcs Must Die! 3* is a cautious sequel – even its large-scale War Scenarios feel familiar, if magnified. But it's grown more experimental since its Stadia launch last year. A new endgame mode, Scramble, is an ironman variant on the formula that treats five back-to-back levels as escalating waves, pushing you towards tactics outside your comfort zone. And new acid traps melt orc armour ready for the kill. Ultimately, the intricate ordering of traps for maximum score combos will hold the attention of top players for hours.

Newcomers are better off embracing the new saw blade launcher, the ricochets of which are not just entertaining but, when fired in an enclosed archway, capable of shredding a troll in seconds. With experience, you can predict and plan for the 45-degree wall bounces, filling entire corridors with blades. This is *Orcs Must Die!* at its best: a comedy scripted on graph paper.

We may not know much about the orcs, and they may not know themselves. But after years in the wilderness, Robot Entertainment has shown it still knows exactly how to make *Orcs Must Die!*. What a pleasure it is to have those green boys back. And then kill them. ■

IN CYGNUS AND IN ELF

Meet OMD's expanded cast

 CYGNUS The old bloke from the original – now de-aged like Bobby De Niro for flashback story sequences.	 VORWICK Cygnus' old ally, turned enemy. Convinced the orcs are better controlled than killed.	 GABRIELLA Cygnus' old enemy, turned ally. Mentor to the younger members of the orc-stopping Order.
 KELSEY Carries the blunderbuss first introduced in <i>Orcs Must Die! Unchained</i>.	 EGAN Naturally gifted, much to Kelsey's frustration. The type to ace his A-levels while playing <i>Halo</i>.	 MAX Main protagonist, but he takes a backseat here. Unlocked after the first campaign.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Orcs Must Die! 3 is a conservative but confident return to form from the masters of a much-loved genre.

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THE WRIGHT STUFF

THE GREAT ACE ATTORNEY CHRONICLES is a pair of adventures with a flair for the dramatic

By Rachel Watts

When Capcom announced that *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles* would be coming to Steam on day one of its overseas release, the eruption of joy PC players felt was like hearing the words ‘not guilty’ after a long, fierce trial. The original trilogy released in the 2000s only made their way to Steam in 2019, so we’re used to waiting a bit longer.

Not this time, though. The international versions of *The Great Ace Attorney: Adventures* and *The Great Ace Attorney Adventures 2: Resolve* are available right out the gate, neatly bundled together in this double feature.

The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles keeps up much of the melodrama and flair from previous games in the series. If you want backstabbing, tragedy, and lawyers slamming their hands on desks, aggressively pointing and shouting – it’s all here. But, after playing all ten cases across both games, I never felt like the story reached the dramatic highs of its predecessors. *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles* has all of the drama of a telenovela, but at the heart of the series is its mysteries, and in that respect both games in the bundle are lacking.

The story of the two prequels follows Ryunosuke Naruhodo, a young Japanese lawyer who has travelled from Meiji period Japan to Victorian England to learn about Britain’s legal system – touting itself as one of the greatest judicial systems

in the world. Together with his legal assistant Susato Mikotoba, Naruhodo helps defend those in need of legal assistance in a series of dramatic courtroom battles.

Although Naruhodo is Phoenix Wright’s 19th-century ancestor, there’s no connection to the previous games whatsoever, and London as a setting provides a fresh slate for new players and seasoned fans alike. It’s a clever choice of

location, and not just because British caricatures are easy pickings. Victorian London is a city with lots of thematic threads, and an important part of the story is the way that Naruhodo has to grapple with London’s seemingly flawless judicial system and the heinous crimes that are lurking in the city’s underbelly.

We’ve seen this with characters in previous games – individuals who seem to place truth and justice above all else, when they don’t really believe that – but this is the first time this duality has been explored on a societal level. It’s an underlying tension that plays out across both

There’s no connection to the previous games whatsoever

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A courtroom visual novel set in the 19th century

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 8GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ace-attorney.com

games, each case revealing more about London’s superficially pristine way of handling the law, and it’s completely new to the series.

COR BLIMEY GUV’NOR

With this new setting comes a wealth of flamboyant characters. Among them is Susato, the legal assistant whose impressive knowledge of Britain’s legal system helps stop our leading lawyer floundering on the defence bench more times than I can count. She may be softly spoken, but she’s got a secret martial art move she calls the Susato Toss where she’ll flip Naruhodo off his feet and onto his back when she’s pissed off. There’s also Barok van Zieks, a ferocious prosecutor known as ‘The Grim Reaper of the Old Bailey’ but is really just a big diva. He drinks wine throughout courtroom sessions, crushes his golden chalice in his fist with dramatic flair, and occasionally pounds his boot on the prosecution table when he gets annoyed.

I love how far Capcom has pushed London stereotypes with some of the characters, to the point where it’s completely farcical. Helping you investigate is Tobias Gregson, a Scotland Yard officer who is constantly noshing on fish and chips wrapped in newspaper (even when he’s been summoned to court), or the lovable street urchin named Gina, whose London accent is so thick I have to slow down my reading and try to decipher what she’s saying.

COURT RECORDS *Ace Attorney has been around for two decades – here’s a timeline of the main games*



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney
2001
Phoenix’s origin story. It’s the game where a parrot takes the witness stand.



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Justice for All
2002
The introduction of whip-happy prosecutor Franziska von Karma.



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Trials and Tribulations
2004
A game with the best guilty breakdown in the series.



Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney
2007
New main character, Apollo, takes over as Phoenix’s apprentice.



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Dual Destinies
2013
Capcom discovers that psychology is ripe for courtroom drama.



Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit of Justice
2016
Set in a country where law and spirituality meet.

Scalding hot tea, a typical British hazard.



FAR LEFT: The trusty court record, make sure you're well acquainted with the evidence

LEFT: Capcom has certainly been inspired by Steampunk fashion for this game.



BELOW: Don't upset witches. They'll pour burning hot wax over you.





ABOVE: Launching fireballs is certainly one way to give your verdict.

FAR RIGHT: It wouldn't be *Ace Attorney* with a thundering 'Objection!'

BELOW: Knowing *Ace Attorney*, I was convinced this pup would take the witness stand.



» Cases are filled with Victorian London archetypes, and you'll see a fair share of cabbies, coppers, street peddlers, top-hatted gentlemen, and corseted ladies. And who can forget the addition of the great detective Herlock Sholmes?

Long gone are the days when Sherlock Holmes was an up-tight, stuffy detective. If Frogware's younger and 'cooler' take on the famous character is not your cup of tea, then Capcom's Herlock Sholmes will have you smashing the tea set. Sholmes leans heavily into the eccentric side of 'eccentric genius' and helps Naruhodo with the investigation parts in between trials.

Instead of just collecting witness statements in these sections, you'll also be helping Sholmes with his less than astute deductions in a new minigame. It involves looking around a scene and picking out clues that help correct Herlock's erroneous deductions, putting the detective back on the right path.

This deduction minigame does liven up the investigation sections, letting you move the camera through the 3D space instead of just clicking the flat image looking for clues. It feels like you're properly snooping through an area. But it does pull away from gathering evidence for the trial. Story-wise, these scenes do relate to the up-coming trial in some way or another, like introducing characters who will be taking the witness stand, but it takes up more focus than simply collecting evidence.

I understand Capcom's desire to shake up the investigative portion with more hands-on deductions, which also makes sense when you've got a Sherlock Holmes analogue lending a hand, but I miss gathering up all the evidence – there's not nearly as much to find. There's a missed feeling of showing up to court with a bag full of mysterious objects, wondering how each one is going to fit into the wider case. There's no real sense of build-up to the trials here.

The courtroom system has also had a refresh thanks to the new setting. Trials now have a lot more dimensions than just witness testimonies and presenting evidence. Instead of convincing the judge, you now have to prove your client's innocence to a six-member jury who

all have their own thoughts and opinions that you'll need to cross-examine. It's a system inherited from the *Professor Layton vs Phoenix Wright* spin-off, and breaks up the mid-trial monotony, ensuring that you won't be going through the same motions that we've seen in every other *Phoenix Wright*.

If the courtroom wasn't busy enough with six new jurors, you'll also have to deal with multiple witnesses taking the stand simultaneously, all of them able to react to each other's testimony. The focus on one witness is now split between three or

even four different people, and you'll need to keep switching between characters. If one person behaves weirdly to another's testimony, you need to poke them and find out why.

Together with looking over evidence for clues, dealing with prosecutor shenanigans, and pressing witnesses for more info, there's a lot to winning a trial. It's noticeably more dynamic, and I didn't think that was possible for an *Ace Attorney* game. And then at the end the jury launches fireballs into an enormous judicial scale to give their verdict.

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

This is the first time in the series that it's delved into a historical setting, exploring the relationship between Japan and Great Britain during the Meiji and Victorian eras. The British Empire is portrayed as imperialistic and arrogant, a view ballooned by the characters banging on about the country's technological advancements and pristine judicial system. As a

Surprise conclusions and left-field explanations are prominent



result, there's a lot of racial discrimination toward Naruhodo and other Japanese characters.

It's a completely fair depiction of Victorian Britain in the 19th century. The fact that the games are made by Japanese developers who want to comment on the social, racial and class discriminations of the era is a refreshing change in tone for a series that had a whole case about a pair of magical polka-dot bloomers. But the way that the British cast treats the Japanese characters is uncomfortable and creates jarring tonal shifts in scenes. Japanese characters are described as 'sneaky' and 'shady', and there's just a general distrust of anyone who doesn't have a thick London accent or isn't shovelling fish and chips into their mouths.

Both games also fall into a lot of typical mystery traps. Surprise conclusions and left-field explanations are prominent in a handful of the cases, which takes much of the fun and dramatic detective work out of the story. During some trials, I felt baffled until the very end, only to be frustrated as an important bit of info was flung into the courtroom for dramatic effect. It often feels like the game favours an outrageous twist over creating a solid, clever plot.

I love the melodramatic theatre of the *Ace Attorney* series, and choosing to focus on the conflict between London's orderly reputation and the grim reality of a city full of secrets, with criminals underneath its floorboards, is a welcome addition to the series. But I really play these games for the mystery. There have been cases in previous games where I've felt completely involved, making sure all the clues are meticulously analysed and putting all the pieces together for a final, satisfying revelation. I didn't get those moments in *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles*. With all the new systems and scandalous story twists and turns, I think that important feeling is ultimately lost. There's lots more to do and the game's presentation is gorgeous, but the mystery of just finding out 'whodunit' gets a little buried in all the drama. ■

HISTORY LESSON

Sherlock Holmes isn't the only famous cameo



NATSUME SOSEKI

In one trial, you defend famous Japanese novelist Sōseki, who visited Great Britain in the 19th century.



GINA LESTRADE

Another Conan Doyle character, Lestrade is the surname of the Scotland Yard detective who consults Sherlock.



ESMERALDA TUSSPELLS

This is a witch who makes waxwork models, a nod to Marie Tussaud who created the famous wax museum.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles has the rush of excitement of the courtroom, but favours melodrama over mystery.

73

TIME CRISIS

CRIS TALES fails to deliver on its temporal premise

By Alistair Jones

The butterfly effect – the theory that changing something in the past, however small, could have a huge impact on the present – is a central tenet of any number of time travel stories. *Cris Tales* is no exception. Simultaneously showing you the past, present, and possible future of its fantasy world, it seems to invite you to make those changes. But beyond a few oft-repeated ideas, it lacks the courage to see that broader concept through.

After being lured to the altar of the local cathedral by a talking frog, orphan Crisbell discovers that she is a Time Mage, an order of magic users whose abilities allow them to perceive and alter the flow of time. In Crisbell's case, that means embodying an aspect of The Lady, a religious figure split into three aspects of herself: a little girl from the past, a young woman from the present, and an old lady in the future.

When she discovers her powers, Crisbell's own sense of reality becomes similarly splintered. As she moves through the world, her perspective is centred on the present, but to her left and right she can see glimpses of the past and future. Walk by a child and your future perspective will show them all grown up, while they might not have been born yet when you look at the past. It's a well-visualised idea, but it rarely comes to much. Within established towns, it's primarily used for uncovering resources that don't exist in the present. Move beyond the city walls, and it's often abandoned entirely, replaced by an alternate puzzle-solving system that allows you to restore or decay objects to open up new paths.

When it comes to combat, the system is realised slightly more effectively. When fights break out, allies and enemies are given a turn order, and when Crisbell steps up, she's able to change the timeline of the enemies around her, rewinding those on her left back into their past, and sending those on her right

forward into their future. For much of the game, Crisbell fights alongside Wilhelm, a mage with nature-based skills, whose abilities revolve around the use of mandrake-like Yucandra seeds, which can either be planted for a payoff that'll hit all nearby enemies in a few turns' time, or thrown for an immediate effect against one target.

TELLING TALES

On Wilhelm's turn, using a poisonous seed applies damage over time to anyone it hits. On her turn, Crisbell can transport the target forward in time, dealing all

Walk by a child and your future perspective will show them all grown up

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A time-altering JRPG set in a war-torn world

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Dreams Uncorporated, SYCK

PUBLISHER
Modus Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5820K
CPU @ 3.30GHz, 8GB
RAM, Nvidia Geforce
950, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3eX6s8n

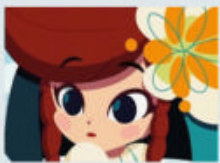
of the poison damage at once, finishing off most enemies in a single two-turn combo. Or a character's water spell can douse an enemy hiding behind a huge shield, before Crisbell sends them to the future, rusting their protection and opening them up to physical attacks. It's an interesting system that initially promises a lot of flexibility and inventive approaches.

But those approaches never really manifest. Basic fights are too short for the extended set-up that time-based combos rely on. Boss fights are even more limiting, with many either dishing out too much punishment to spend several turns on build-up, or actively preventing the use of your time powers. Later on, as new characters with more martial skill-sets join the roster, Crisbell's time manipulation takes more and more of a back seat, replaced by standard spells and attacks.

Crisbell's ability to manipulate the flow of time is presented as *Cris Tales*' central gimmick, but while it's an idea used to great visual effect in a bright and often charming world, it's crippling underutilised within the rest of the game. A few simple combos don't offer any opportunity to play with your powers in combat encounters that are either too trivial or too punishing to warrant meaningful experimentation. In the world itself, the idea is either abandoned entirely or limited to a tool for exploration and resource gathering. With its most compelling tool relegated to little more than an interesting curio, and a narrative simply not beefy enough to do the heavy lifting required to make up for it, *Cris Tales* fails to build on an interesting set of foundations. ■

DOCTOR WHO?

The time-hopping team of Cris Tales



CRISBELL
Crisbell discovers the ability to change her perception of time, seeing past, present, and future.



WILHELM
A mage in the body of a young boy, Wilhelm uses Yucandra seeds to help his friends.



CHRISTOPHER
An elemental mage, Christopher is desperate to fight to avenge his fallen brother.



MATIAS
A frog who helps Crisbell unlock her powers, has a top hat, and can hop through time.



PAULINA
Paulina is a living cathedral who helps Crisbell and company travel around the world.



THE LADY
Central to the religion of *Cris Tales* world, The Lady appears in stained glass windows.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Cris Tales lacks the conviction to build its curious time travel premise into an entertaining experience.

57



ABOVE: The 2.5D environment art is beautifully detailed.

FAR LEFT: As anime mentors go, a talking top-hatted frog is pretty fun.

LEFT: Enemies get younger or older depending on where they stand.



Battles fragment as Crisbell uses her powers.

POKÉMON MONSTER HUNTER

MONSTER HUNTER STORIES 2: WINGS OF RUIN is an approachable spin-off.

By Daniella Lucas

I've always been a distant admirer of the *Monster Hunter* series, with its lush worlds and vicious beasties, but no matter how many times I've tried – be it the early PSP forays or the more recent *Monster Hunter World* – it's never clicked for me. As much as I want to love the series, I've been unable to get past the five-hour mark. There are so many systems to learn and aspects to juggle that it can be overwhelming. *Monster Hunter Stories 2* has been my way in.

A spin-off of the main series, *Stories* focuses on, er, story, and uses a turn-based battle system and monster-catching mechanics in place of the usual hunting action. While it's a sequel to *Monster Hunter Stories*, you won't need to know anything about the first game – which is handy, as it was only ever available on 3DS and mobile. You play as a rookie 'Rider', the grandchild of a great hero called Red. Setting off to investigate a strange red light that's making monsters go berserk, you soon find yourself entrusted with a Rathalos egg and unravelling the mysteries of an ancient prophecy alongside your comedy cat sidekick Navirou. To do so you'll fight huge monsters, raid their dens for eggs, and then raise their stolen offspring to do your bidding.

It's got a touch of *Pokémon* to it – you can have a squad of up to six Monsties (that's what a Monster is called when it's your pet, and no, it's never not silly when you say it) that you can switch out depending on how a battle is going. Only one can fight beside you at a time, so you'll have to consider your choices carefully. Fights at their most basic are based on a rock-paper-scissors mechanic where speed beats power, power beats technical, and technical beats speed, but eventually you'll also be taking weapon type, items, and elements into consideration.

Thankfully the turn-based combat gives you plenty of time to consider your options, and this is where the series clicked for me. Instead of

having to dance around a flailing beast, considering which body parts to strike with which weapons and praying the hits will land, I was able to methodically go through what I

wanted and have the space to understand just how all of the amazing layers of *Monster Hunters'* battles work together before striking. *Stories* distills all of the elements that make monster battles so

satisfying into something far more approachable. You could brute force your way through on basic attacks, but the moment you figure out how

Raid their dens for eggs, then raise their offspring to do your bidding

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cuter, story-driven *Monster Hunter* spin-off

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070, i7-7700, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
www.monsterhunter.com/stories2/uk/

to deflate a fluffy Poalumu's collar like a balloon is joyful. There's a satisfaction in foiling a monster's plans before they come to fruition.

PUKEI-MON

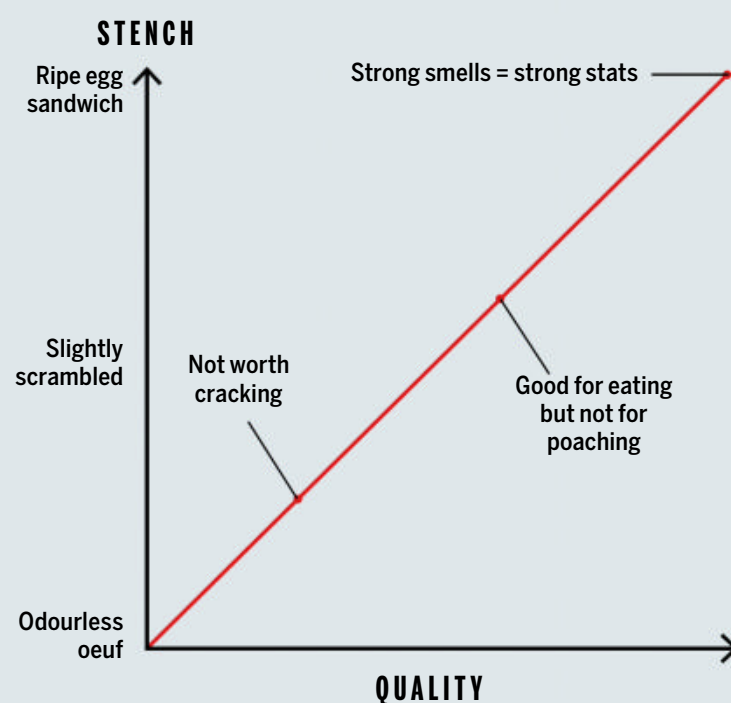
It's also great being able to have that poison-spitting, wyvern horror you just fought eventually fight alongside you with a much less scary nickname. Thank you Pubert the Pukei-Pukei. Teaming up with Monsties and seeing how they fight with you makes it easier to understand how to battle against their nastier brethren. I do feel a pang of guilt every time I raid a nest for eggs, but that's quickly replaced by the nervous excitement of wondering what might be inside.

There's an element of randomness when picking up eggs, as each nest can host several kinds. The pattern will tell you what type is inside, but you'll also get hints for the quality of its stats based on weight and how it smells. It's worth looking out for golden 'rare' monster dens when out exploring for better eggs. Don't be shy about gathering as many as you can, as eventually you'll be able to splice their genes into each other to handcraft more powerful Monsties. No doubt there are perfect stats and bonuses to aim for with each, and a perfect team composition, but like a *Pokémon* trainer with a favourite starter, I poured all of the strongest skills into my best-buddy Pubert and managed to get through.

Monster Hunter Stories 2 looks cute, but retains the amount of depth the series is known for. It's not as expansive or as fast-paced as *Monster Hunter World*, but it works. *Stories 2* is the accessible series entry point and has inspired me to return to other games to test my skills. ■

THE SNIFF TEST

How to tell if you've got a good egg



PC GAMER VERDICT

A cute and approachable turn-based adventure spin-off with more than enough bite to satisfy mainline series fans.

80

Kayna acts as your teacher early on in the game.



FAR LEFT: Golden monster dens have rarer eggs inside.

LEFT: The cat puns here aren't all completely pawful.

BOTTOM: A few old faces from the first *Stories* game will pop up, but you don't need to know them to enjoy it.





HORDE MODE

Building frantic defences in RTS **VEDELEM: THE GOLDEN HORDE**

You know, little inhabitants of Vedelem's 13th century keep: it might have been wiser to build a farm in the years of peace *before* the Mongolians invaded. Now, as your advisor – really, as the god figure trying to keep you alive – I have only desperate minutes in which to plonk down some essential infrastructure. That includes sawmills and quarries, houses and military camps, and each requires mounds of slowly accruing resources.

Vedelem is a strategy game where you're trying to defend a fragile central keep, primarily by building walls and training squads of eager little soldiers. When the enemy arrives – they appear in waves over the course of each game session – you drag-select and inflict your troops upon them, in the tried and tested RTS manner. It's pretty satisfying, zooming in to watch them wail on each other, despite the budget, slightly wonky animations. In the late game, the number of soldiers can get *ridiculous*. How am I supposed to defend the keep against... *that*?

Walls will help slow down the invaders, while swordsmen, archers and spearmen will obviously mop them up – but everything comes back

to those resources sitting on the procedurally generated map. While you're fighting (or preparing to fight), you should also be building stuff: sawmills to harvest wood, houses to gather villagers, quarries to break up useful stone. Naturally, each building can be upgraded, as can your keep, soldiers... well, *everything*. Fans of city builders will be at home laying everything down and watching the resources roll in. It's just a shame there are

no little villagers ferrying the goods back and forth.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

You begin on a small patch of land, but you can expand your territory by spending wood and such, with resource-rich nodes being slightly

Naturally each building can be upgraded, as can your keep and soldiers

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A real-time strategy game where you have to improve and defend a central keep

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Castle Roaches

PUBLISHER
Breda University of Applied Sciences

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/VedelemGame

more costly to acquire. And so you place additional sawmills, and ultimately build up a labyrinthine defensive wall. All while listening out for the war horn sound effect that lets you know when the enemy has entered your territory.

Every fight I did a little better, and there is room to grow with the generous game modes. Skirmish asks you to survive for a set time, with that time increasing on the harder difficulties, while in Endless you're simply trying to beat your previous score. There are Challenge Maps, as well, that alter the map with specific conditions.

There's a hell of a lot to *Vedelem*, more than I expected from a free university project. That's evident in a basic-looking UI, and wonky but endearing animations. Neither detract from a compelling real-time strategy that makes the most of its simple premise. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An impressive RTS that makes up for its rough edges with satisfying strategy and a surprising amount of content.

83

BELOW: It's easy to recover from a crash, but it will affect your score.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
KabutoKai

LINK
kabutokai.itch.io

TRICK DECK

It's all downhill from here in **DOWNHILL JAM**

I'm no good at the tricks, but I love the sensation of skating games, feeling the concrete and metal under wheel as I perform the two moves I can remember, again and again. One of the best series for the sensation – and for the atmosphere, for that matter – was the impossibly cool *Jet Set Radio*, which had you roller-skating round a hip, cel-shaded city. *Downhill Jam* comes remarkably close to it, offering a downhill course in a similarly funky city. There are little alternate routes, collectible cash, and at the end a score so you can see how badly you did.

At the risk of burying the lede: in *Downhill Jam* you're a cat on a hoverboard. You can customise the cat, giving it a hat and different boards to ride. But, despite the

hovering, it feels familiarly like a skateboard, grinding rails in the same way and with controls that have become the standard over the years.

That's *Downhill's* greatest strength: you can pick it up and (probably) know how to play it, grinning as you attempt its course a couple of times. The university students behind it have used their project time to make a small, polished game, rather than a broader and potentially scrappier one. Given that so much of skating is about the feel of it, I think that was the right approach.

So, it's short. It's just one course, and you won't play it more than a handful of times. But *Downhill* captures the sensation of skating, in a world that largely looks the part. Oh and I mentioned the hoverboarding cat, right? ■

76

LEAP YEAR

Robbing the rich in retro platformer **JANOSIK**

They don't make platformers like they used to – and that's mostly for the best. I have a hard time going back to games on the Mega Drive, and having to contend with an ancient lives system and no damned saves. But there's not a lot of humour, or playfulness, now that everything's an emotive *Metroidvania*. Sometimes you want a nostalgic shot of light-hearted platforming.

Oh, hey *Janosik*. Didn't see you there. To be fair, that may be because you're a highwayman – a real 17th century robber, and Slovakia's version of Robin Hood. I wasn't aware of *Janosik*, and this is an affectionate game about him, even if Wikipedia has little to say about his career as a platformer. I suppose you are robbing the rich, as you leap around an exceptionally deadly keep, searching

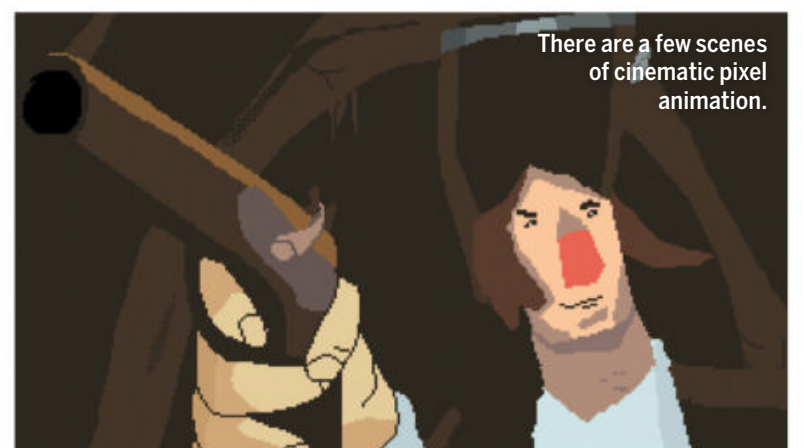
for companions that were captured while you were, um, having a piss.

OK, so *Janosik* is a *Metroidvania*. You'll unlock abilities including a double-jump, and double-back on yourself. But it's one with the spirit and energy of an Amiga game. There's a boisterous chiptune soundtrack and vivid pixel art, but above all there's the speed of it – *Janosik* knows you lead a busy life, so it hurls you around the place at a blistering clip.

Despite being set in a large, connected world, not an inch of map is wasted here. *Janosik* is an ant farm of activity, jam-packed with secrets, spikes, and patrolling enemies. I just wish I had more skill with it, or that the checkpoints were a little more generous. As it is, I was ultimately worn down by having to repeat large sections of the game. ■

75

BELOW: You need to find switches and keys, just like the old days.



There are a few scenes of cinematic pixel animation.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Onix Games

LINK
bit.ly/3rWKsji

This man is a
goose racist.



FOWL PLAY

Being even more of a nuisance than usual in **UNTITLED GOOSE GAME**

Scenarios of Britishness are a largely untapped gaming resource. Aside from the leafy, Radio 4 apocalypse of *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, few games accurately capture the damp-bunting disappointment of the British experience. And until someone makes a savage economy management sim set during a Women's Institute charity bake sale, we'll have to make do with *Untitled Goose Game*: the world's first mild inconvenience-'em-up.

There's something nice about playing a game where my goal isn't to break necks or save worlds or amass boundless wealth. As a horrible goose I'm more concerned with stealing hats and trapping people in garages. It's worrying how happy I am to go along with this seemingly meaningless list of things to do. Firstly, because it suggests the only call to action I need is a to-do list, no matter how banal or obtuse the tasks. And secondly, because I never question why a goose even has a to-do list. Who wrote it? For what purpose?

It's slightly irresistible in the same way clicking a retractable pen is. If you're holding that pen, only a trained buddhist monk could resist at least three clicks. In the same way, I

defy anyone to play *Untitled Goose Game* and not honk inside a milk bottle or play the harmonica while flapping your wings. There's a simple, silly immediacy to it that's refreshing. But there's some depth, too. Working out what kind of chaos you need to unleash to make a scared boy buy back his own stolen toy, for instance, does impart a sense of gentle purpose. The result is a combination of puzzle and stealth, underpinned by a constant desire to flap around hammering the honk button.

And now we come to the joyless shuck bit: *Untitled Goose Game* isn't always fun to play. There's an imprecise sponginess to everything. This is at its worst when you're being chased or ushered away by the

**There's a
simple, silly
immediacy to it
that's
refreshing**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If Aardman Animation make a *Metal Gear Solid* game

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
House House

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Local co-op

LINK
goose.game

people whose lives you're ruining. On top of this, the stealth systems and camera can be wobbly. It seems absurd to be this critical about a game in which the main goal is 'literally be a goose', but I did start to get frustrated after my third unsuccessful attempt to dump a pint glass in a canal.

HONK

I wonder if it's a game that would exist without the encouraging support of social media – a novelty idea that the community loved in theory, that was never likely to live up to whatever weird expectations we had. That said, *Untitled Goose Game* is more than a mere novelty. There's structure here, with some surprising and thoughtful secrets, and some geographical unlocks which even remind me of *Dark Souls*. And if the thought of that doesn't enthrall you, there's always the milk bottle. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

House House's *Untitled Goose Game* is the best stealth-based avian nuisance simulator currently available on PC.

68

BELOW: Fire beats wood, wood beats water, water beats owl.



AVIAN FLEW

No corridor fight scenes in **OWLBOY**

Otus, the hero from *Owlboy*, is terrible at everything. His fellow villagers seem to hate him. Everything he does seems to go wrong. He's even mute, the poor lad. And that's probably why guiding him to some degree of success is so pleasing. However bad he is at the start, I take comfort in knowing I can't make it worse. That said, even the earliest attempts to fix things go wrong.

The first beat of the story sees Otus and his soldier friend Geddy chasing a 'troublemaker', only to miss the entire fleet of pirates that descends on the village. The lovely animation just makes things worse: Otus' simple sprite is still capable of expressing fear and doubt, and I just want to pat him on the feathered shoulder and pretend everything will be OK. Generally, this is one of the best bits

of a game that already looks glorious: despite the 16-bit trappings, it's quite capable of making you understand what the characters are feeling.

Otus' unique movement poses some challenge. He flaps about between platforms, clutching a friend in his talons. It's an unusual setup that makes *Owlboy* sometimes feel like a bullet hell game in a bird costume, and it's not always wholly satisfying. Swapping and dropping teammates can feel clunky and unintuitive. And Otus' agility isn't quite up to the game's more frenetic boss battles. It often feels like you're drifting or flapping into projectiles you were knowingly trying to avoid. It's not terrible, but it does mean that the slower, puzzle-based sections of *Owlboy* leave a more positive impression than the otherwise enjoyable boss battles. ■

78

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
D-Pad Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house



SHELTER

You know when spring arrives, and you see the mummy ducks with their trails of fluffy yellow ducklings, and the only thought that springs to mind is, 'half of you are going to die'? That's how it feels playing *Shelter*. There's an overwhelming sense of looming disaster, and no matter how many radishes I pick or groundhogs I butcher, I know it won't be enough to keep all five of my precious badger children alive. I'm so committed to failure, in fact, that I almost leave one of my offspring behind because I assume they're already dead, as a means of the game warning me how grim things are going to get. In fact, I've never been more glad not to be a badger, and that's saying something. ■

71



PLANET ZOO

This is the most relaxing and stressful game I've ever played. On the one hand, I can set the camera mode to orbit and sit and watch baby hippos for hours on end. And I can zoom so close to lion pawpuds that I can practically reach out and touch them without the danger of being mauled. On the other hand: there's disease everywhere, I'm not making enough money, and all my animals keep having too much sex. More than this, the degree of freedom is so high it's almost paralysing. Even with the excellent and detailed tutorial system, there's a nagging sense that I shouldn't be left in charge of the welfare of all of these delicate animals. Just ask my chronically depressed bears and bulimic antelopes. ■

80



GOAT SIMULATOR

We'll top off this month of me shitting on games people pretend to love by finishing with *Goat Simulator* – a title that defines our knees-up, clown shoes, rumpitty pumpitty, oopsy-daisy Mr Grimble lackwit obsession with games being 'hilarious'. It doesn't work, never did, and the positive Steam reviews suggest nobody cares. It's the same weak joke your dad tells wrong every Christmas – the game equivalent of an airbag that doesn't stop you from being maimed but does feature a picture of a kitten wearing a pineapple hat. ■

42

THE BEST GIFT IDEA FOR GAMERS

There's something
for everyone on
PlayStation™Store:

Games | Add-ons | Movies
Subscriptions | And more!



PlayStation.Store

Browse and discover thousands of games,
add-ons, subscriptions and much more



PlayStation.Plus

PlayStation®4 Online Multiplayer, two PlayStation®4 games
every month, exclusive PlayStation™Store discounts and more



THE PERFECT GIFT, EVERY TIME

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



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GROUP TEST

Our review of the six best controllers on the market.



98

NEWS

Everything you need to know about the Steam Deck.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Three expert PC builds to make finding the right parts for you a breeze.

100

TECH REPORT

Who better to build a computer than another computer?

GROUP TEST

PC CONTROLLERS

When a keyboard and mouse just won't cut it, it's time to go analogue. *By Jacob Ridley*

It's not often you'll hear a PC gamer admit that the combo of keyboard and mouse is ill-suited for gaming. It does happen, though, and there are oodles of adventure games, sports games, and brawlers that play better on a controller. So, you'll want one of the best

controllers close at hand for when you run into one.

There are many schools of thought on what makes one controller better than another, though, and the biggest divide undoubtedly comes down to thumbsticks: do you go for two parallel sticks, as is customary for

Sony, or instead offer an asymmetrical approach? The latter championed by Microsoft, yet also an approach used by a good few more. Even if you firmly believe one layout is best, you'll want to consider other potential features, namely connectivity, compatibility, and adjustability.





Elite Wireless Series 2

XBOX £160

The best controller, no question

1 While the low cost and build quality of the standard Microsoft Wireless Controller has effectively made it pointless for any third-party company to make their own devices, the Elite controllers have never given pause for thought to the ephemeral notion of 'value'. As such the Elite Series 2 is a no-compromise controller that feels fantastic in your hands. The ergonomics are classic Xbox pad, but the feel of every button, stick, or trigger has been tailored to feel *just right* and the weighting make it feel balanced but also robust. It's eminently

customisable, has USB Type-C charging (wirelessly through the case if you so desire), and a genuinely impressive battery life of up to 40 hours. The thumbsticks and triggers are an improvement over the original Elite, where I did find they would loosen up over extended use.

The only sign of wear over nearly two years of use of the Series 2 is one of my shoulder buttons will occasionally register a double-click.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great battery life
- USB Type-C charging
- A great-feeling controller in the hand

SPECS WEIGHT: 345G / 0.76LBS / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH, 2.4GHZ XBOX WIRELESS / **BATTERY:** INTERNAL RECHARGEABLE BATTERY / **BATTERY LIFE:** UP TO 40 HOURS

Wireless Controller

XBOX £55

Why buy anything else?

2 When Microsoft created the original Xbox 360 controller it served notice to every third-party manufacturer that they might as well not bother making pads anymore. The massive Duke controller was crazy-big, but the redesigned 360 pad was another level, and what's more it was well made and as affordable as practically any other option out there, especially for the PC. Then the Xbox One controller just absolutely nailed the design, and this mildly updated version for the Series X/S is a perfect meeting of build quality, ergonomics, and value. It's not

cheap – nor does it feel that way – but it's also about the same price as most decent, third-party controllers you could buy for the PC, and those won't be wireless. And it completely outshines its competitors on every level, from weight, to textured grip, to thumbsticks, to triggers.

This controller's only true rivals are Sony's similarly well-made, similarly affordable PS4 and PS5 pads, but for me it's the Xbox controller every time.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Bluetooth and Xbox connections
- 3.5mm headphone jack
- Rechargeable packs sold separately

SPECS WEIGHT: 281G / 0.62LBS / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH, 2.4GHZ XBOX WIRELESS / **BATTERY:** 2X AA / **BATTERY LIFE:** UP TO 30 HOURS

GROUP TEST

COMES WITH AN EXCESSIVE NUMBER OF SHORTCUTS ON THE FRONT OF THE CONTROLLER

3

Wolverine Ultimate

RAZER £160

Clicky with a side of Chroma

3 What you're looking at here is Razer's attempt at the Xbox Elite Wireless Controller crown. But let's get the record straight early on: the Razer Wolverine Ultimate is not wireless. We love the Razer Wolverine Ultimate for lots of reasons, but its lack of wireless connectivity and relatively high price for a wired option has it losing out on our top recommendations.

If wireless isn't on your list of priorities, though, the Wolverine has a lot else to offer. For starters, it has some of the most satisfyingly clicky buttons in the biz. I'm talking a mechanical

keyboard in controller form. I love this design decision, and the controller feels that little bit more rapid and responsive for it.

It also comes with an excessive number of shortcuts on the front of the controller, matched only by the sheer volume of triggers, levers, and adjusters on the rear of the pad. This thing is plastered in remappable buttons, which can be changed at a moment's notice with profiles in the Windows 10.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Interchangeable layout
- Loud, satisfying buttons
- Remappable buttons

SPECS WEIGHT: 0.6 LBS (272G) / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRED / **FEATURES:** HEAPS OF REMAPPABLE BUTTONS AND TRIGGERS, LED LIGHTING, ADJUSTABLE TRIGGERS AND VIBRATION, CLICKY SWITCHES

C40 TR

ASTRO £190

A premium PS4 pad for PC

4 The standard DualShock 4 still makes for a mighty controller on PC, but we've been keen to find another – something that can match what the mighty Elite is to the Xbox Controller but with the parallel analogue stick layout demanded by some. The C40 TR from Astro is an attempt to do just that.

On the surface it might look like your everyday controller but the C40 TR is a highly modular design. That means whatever the controller layout you're after, you can probably configure the C40 TR to accommodate. You could even relive the left-leaning

asymmetrical thumbsticks of the Nintendo 64 controller if you really want to.

On the rear of the controller you'll find a few familiar features from the Elite pad. Adjustable trigger stops make for easy fine-tuning, while two rear triggers comfortably embedded in the grip ensure easy to reach shortcuts. Included software also makes editing profiles simple, and there's even an included equaliser for the controller's 3.5mm jack.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Remappable, interchangeable layout
- Promising serviceability
- Adjustable trigger stops

SPECS WEIGHT: 0.68 LBS (320G) / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, USB WIRED / **FEATURES:** INTERCHANGEABLE LAYOUT, REAR TRIGGERS, PS4 SUPPORT



CONNECT YOUR CONSOLE CONTROLLER TO PC

Modern controllers work on PC with next to no fuss, and that includes those destined for a life hooked up to the PS5 or Series X. For wired connectivity, it couldn't get much simpler. You need only plug the controller into your PC with a compatible cable. Some features may be limited on a per controller, per game, basis, but Windows, and Steam, does wonders at offering support in many games. Similarly, a wireless connection is easily achieved via Bluetooth. Sony and Microsoft controllers have supported Bluetooth for years now, and it's as simple as pairing the device to your PC for a wire-free connection.

Spectra Enhanced

POWERA £40

Budget yet flashy

5 PowerA may not be a household name yet, but they're pretty well-known when it comes to budget PC and console controllers. The Spectra Enhanced is in large part the wired controller you'd expect: Xbox-style layout, standard enough facade, and some generic triggers. But look closer and you'll find a few bonus features not yet commonplace. Most notably, the Spectra lights up. There are seven colours to choose from for the facade: red, orange, yellow, lime, aqua, blue and purple. A nice touch on an otherwise fairly generic-

looking design. Then there's the rear of the controller, which offers trigger locks and remappable grip buttons. Two features you'd only expect on more premium gear. The PowerA does feel a little cheaper than its contemporary console counterparts, but we like it because it offers something a little different in a pinch. The slightly updated Infinity Enhanced model also comes with more colours and XSX-specific features for the same price.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great button feel
- 200% more colourful than most
- Feels a little cheap

SPECS WEIGHT: 0.99 LBS (447G) / CONNECTIVITY: MICRO USB / FEATURES: LED EDGE-LIGHTING, 3-WAY TRIGGER LOCKS

DualSense Wireless

SONY £60

An impressively well thought out controller

6 The DualSense is a massive step up from the DualShock 4 that came bundled with every PS4 console. Not only has the former's wiry shape been filled out for more form-fitting ergonomics with the PS5 pad, but that extra space has been packed with motors and mechanisms for more immersive haptics and context-adaptive triggers. Some of which you can experience on PC. I'll admit, the list of PC games that support the unique features of the DualSense is pretty slim today – *Metro Exodus: Enhanced Edition* is the primary proponent

on PC. That said, it's still early days for Steam's improved support for the controller. More games are likely to deliver expanded support in the future, and if it were to gain traction on PC then it'd be ready to take it to the Xbox controllers on a whole new level. The DualSense does lack the bespoke wireless connectivity offered by the Xbox pads on PC, however, which is just that little bit more limiting.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Adaptive triggers
- Haptic rumble
- Best in class

SPECS WEIGHT: 0.46 LBS (210G) / CONNECTIVITY: USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH / BATTERY: RECHARGEABLE / FEATURES: TOUCHPAD, HAPTICS, ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS

HANDS ON

Valve has unveiled its new handheld gaming PC, **STEAM DECK**

The Steam Deck isn't going to be another Steam Machine. Well, OK it *literally* is. As a full gaming PC that runs purely on SteamOS, and aims to wrestle gamers away from Windows, it feels like a new generation of that failed idea. But where the Steam Machines were ultimately evidence of Valve's initial naivety around PC hardware, the Steam Deck is something far more assured, far more believable, and far more timely.

The most basic, and obvious comparison when you first clap eyes on the Deck is the Nintendo Switch. After all, it's another handheld gaming machine with an attractive price point. While the Steam Deck is most certainly that, it's also something else entirely.

This is handheld PC gaming with the same benefits and pain points we all recognise as long-term PC gamers, like compatibility, bugs, and endless graphics settings. Yes, it absolutely looks like a simple handheld console, but think of it like a tiny touchscreen laptop, but with gamepad wings instead of a keyboard beard.

WHY NOW?

PCs with a Switch-like form factor aren't a new thing, however. There are several products that have done the rounds on platforms such as Kickstarter, and are now shifting into full retail. Alienware too has had a look at handheld gaming PCs with its UFO concept. But they all had three things in common – Windows sucking on a small touchscreen, weak hardware, and sky-high pricing.

Valve has come in with an immediately arresting £349 (\$399)

price for the base 64GB model, and that has made everyone sit up and take notice. It's also made a lot of people pay the reservation price, to the point where the queue for the unreleased hardware already stretches around the block beyond June 2022.

But why does Valve believe handheld PC gaming suddenly makes sense? A large part of it is down to the hardware available to the Deck's developers and engineers. With a semi-custom partner such as AMD – who has also partnered with Sony and Microsoft to create bespoke silicon for their own consoles – Valve had a chance to tailor the technology to the demands of gaming on the go, instead of simply reaching for off-the-shelf laptop hardware and taping half a controller to either side of it.

The Deck's new AMD APU, a slice of silicon that combines both graphics and processor, uses the same combination

The Deck can handle any size of SD card to expand storage.





ABOVE: Valve has done “a ton” of testing on reliability to ensure those capacitive thumbsticks don’t suffer from drift.

of Zen 2 CPU cores and RDNA 2 graphics as the Xbox Series X/S. But it’s a combination we’ve not seen from any APU otherwise available to PC gamers. Though, with four CPU cores combined with eight GPU compute units (CUs), it does admittedly look rather off the pace compared with our many-core CPUs and a 40CU card like the RX 6700 XT.

But there is the potential for a little magic sauce in the form of the LPDDR5 memory; 16GB of the stuff, running at 5,500 MT/s in quad-channel configurations. That will give it far more bandwidth than any other APU around today. With both the GPU and CPU parts of the chip fighting for memory resources, having that extra bandwidth is known to be a real boon for AMD’s silicon when it comes to gaming performance.

“We might actually be one of the first products to showcase this memory technology,” says Valve hardware engineer Yazan Aldehayyat. “That gives a lot of future proofing, especially since we’re not the only people with this architecture. Any optimisation that game developers make for this new architecture will carry forth to benefit us as well.”

NEW GEAR’S RESOLUTION

Valve has also spoken about a target for the 1280x800 native resolution of its touchscreen starting at 30 fps, with that being “the floor of what we consider playable”, notes Steam Deck

developer Pierre-Loup Griffais. And, considering he also says it’s “achieved a level of performance to really run the latest generation of games without problems”, things look promising for genuine PC gaming on the go.

But the Steam Deck is only the start of things. Valve learned some tough lessons about making hardware during the Steam Machine debacle; bringing in partners before it had finished making the key component – SteamOS – actually functional. As a result Steam Machines started shipping with Windows pre-installed, and quickly became an irrelevance in the market. With the Deck, however, Valve has gone it alone first, unveiling both the hardware and software as a proof-of-concept in one fell swoop before trying to encourage others to join in the handheld game.

“It’s clearly going to be establishing a product category that ourselves and other PC manufacturers are going to

be able to participate in,” says Gabe Newell of the Deck. “And that’s going to have long-term benefits for us.”

So, I wouldn’t bet against the likes of Asus and

MSI releasing premium Decks themselves next year, especially with the pre-order numbers Valve has enjoyed. Though whether *even pricier* Steam Decks will be a success is up for debate – I’d suggest probably not. ■

Dave James

THAT WILL GIVE IT FAR MORE BANDWIDTH THAN ANY OTHER APU AROUND TODAY



1 Either side of the 800p touchscreen are twin capacitive thumbpads, an evolution of those found on the Steam Controller.

2 The Deck comes in three flavours: 64GB eMMC, 256GB NVMe SSD and 512GB NVMe SSD.

3 Battery life is key with handhelds – Valve’s promising a mildly concerning two to eight hours.

4 The new SteamOS 3.0 operating system promises increased support for Windows games.

WHAT ARE THE SPECS?
The tech in the Deck

SET AN AI TO MAKE AN AI

GOOGLE is already putting machine learning to work on improving itself

We have previously suggested that a robot-controlled future in which humans are hunted for sport is a likely one, but we've had a bit of trouble with our blood pressure lately, and have decided techno-utopianism is just as reasonable, in the style of Iain M Banks' *Culture* novels.

The crucial difference here is that, while the murderous AI of the Terminator is a human invention, the benevolent Minds that oversee the Culture are AIs built by AIs, and it seems to work out better that way.

There's a step in microchip design known as floorplanning, in which the building blocks of a chip are marked out before they go anywhere near a silicon wafer. You put some processing cores here, a touch of cache RAM there, top it all off with some GPU cores over here, and decorate with off-chip connections around the edges. Related areas cluster together so that the electrical pathways most commonly taken are the shortest. The whole thing needs to be verified before it's made, of course, and one of the great skills of chip design is floorplanning them to be as efficient as possible.

And it's very much like a game, the sort of optimisation problem that you see in *Spacechem* or *StarCraft* build queues. The sort of thing, as we've definitely mentioned here before, that AIs are good at.

So that's exactly what Google has done. In its data centres, Google uses a type of processor called a TPU – that's Tensor Processing Unit. They power AI and deep learning applications, and are essentially ASICs – Application Specific Integrated Circuits – at their most basic level they're not too dissimilar to GPUs without any texture-mapping hardware. The tensors being processed here are the same ones being thrown about by the Tensor Cores in Nvidia's RTX graphics cards to obtain their deep-learning approach to upscaling.

So what's a tensor? Well, it's a number. Quite a lot of numbers. A rectangular array of numbers (known as scalars), arranged into rows and columns, is a matrix – think of your PC's screen, with all the pixels labelled by their coordinates. Define a line between two points on that matrix, and you've got a vector, the basis of game graphics in 1980s games such as *Starglider* and *Asteroids*. The vector is the most basic kind of tensor, but once you decide you want to do linear algebra – and we have evidence that



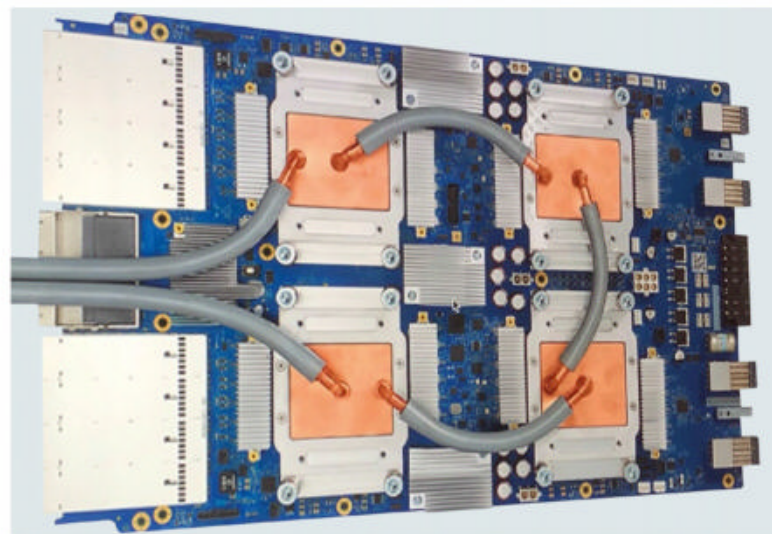
Games master

Google Brain's deep learning approach to floorplanning is reminiscent of another Google AI project we've featured here, AlphaGo, which in 2015 became the first computer Go program to beat a human professional Go player without handicap on a full-sized board. AlphaGo later branched into AlphaStar, an AI that plays *StarCraft II* at the Grand Master level.

LEFT: An Intel 80486 CPU showing the different parts etched into the silicon.

RIGHT: Dr Azalia Mirhoseini co-founded and co-leads Google Research's machine learning team.

FAR RIGHT: One of Google's third-generation TPUs.



HAL 9000 *Getting AI to design things doesn't always turn out the way you expect*



Image credit: Autodesk

ELBO

This chair was generatively designed using Autodesk's Project Dreamcatcher. It has an organic look to it.

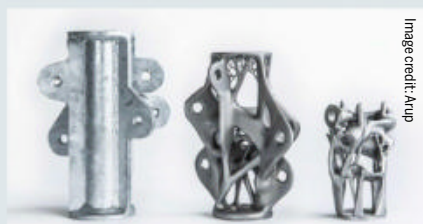
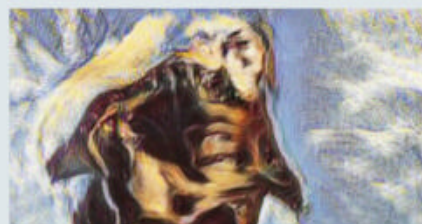


Image credit: Arup

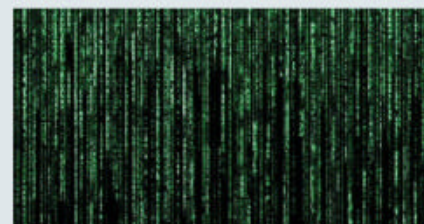
ARUP

These components by Arup are designed to carry the same loads and forces, and can be 3D printed.



ART

This 'dog' was created by a GAN – a Generative Adversarial Network. See more at aiartmedia.com.



WRITE

The GPT-3 language generator produced an article published on the Guardian website in September 2020.

some people do make this decision – you can create tensors that map between different points on multidimensional (more than three) arrays of numbers, and then you can start multiplying them together.

These tensors, ever-shifting in their linear algebra (the inventor of linear algebra, German polymath Hermann Grassmann, is worth looking up for his remarkable beard as much as for his formidable achievements that went largely unrecognised in his lifetime), are what allow the training of deep learning systems, essentially getting an AI to do the same thing over and over, marking its efforts until it gets really good at one task. Google Brain decided to try AL floorplanning with its TPUs – and the results of this experiment are not only better than human-designed chips, they're structurally different too. And they're in Google's data centres.

So how do you train an AI to lay out something as complex as a TPU? "We use a method called reinforcement learning," says Anna Goldie from Google Brain, who's also co-author of the paper 'A graph placement methodology for fast chip design' published in Nature that sets out AI floorplanning. "We have this neural network that places the components of the chip one at a time onto a canvas, and after it's placed all of them, we get a measure of how good the placement is, and feed that back into the network. Then we do it again, tens of thousands of times, until it gets really good at it."

"The agent takes up to six hours to learn how to do the [chip component] placement," says Goldie's colleague and paper co-author Azalia Mirhoseini. "But it took us a while to train the agent and come up with the algorithm ourselves."

BRAIN POWER

Perhaps the most provocative claim in Google Brain's paper is that the chips being produced by an AI trained in six hours are superior to those created by the highly skilled humans who usually do the job. Mirhoseini explains that it's just as much about the process as the chips themselves, "These chips are going to be in the data centre and serve many, many users, so if you can make a next-generation chip even one day faster, one that's more energy-efficient and has more compute [capability] that's where it makes a

huge difference. We've made this process much faster, and fully automated." But there are structural differences too. "They do surprising things," says Goldie. "We see strange placements that humans maybe wouldn't have come up with."

"The placements that [the neural network] comes up with can look very different from what the human experts

will do," says Mirhoseini. "They have a much more organic shape, like it's more curved, there are these doughnut-shaped placements, but it all makes sense, because maybe these shapes will help reduce the distance from the things in the centre to the doughnut around the edge."

The next step is to use these chips to design and run the AI algorithms of the future. And while it takes a while for a new TPU to find its way into a data centre in large numbers, the process is underway. There's an AI revolution coming, but a good part of it will be used for recognising text in photos or reading our email in order to better serve us advertising. The techno utopia remains, as ever, tantalisingly close. ■

Ian Evenden

THE RESULTS ARE BETTER THAN HUMAN-DESIGNED CHIPS

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,216

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi MSI £260 A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 10900K Intel £529 If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200 Corsair £176 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow with RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN750 1TB Western Digital £169 Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Is a capture-the-flag-loving wizard going to be angry when he finds me?”

Psst, don't tell anyone, but **TRIBES: ASCEND** isn't dead

Playing *Tribes: Ascend*, an abandoned multiplayer-only FPS, feels like being somewhere you're not supposed to be. Did someone forget to turn the game off? Or did I stumble into a pocket dimension? Is a capture-the-flag-loving wizard going to be very angry when he finds me here?

The uncanniness of playing *Tribes: Ascend* today is funny given that it would feel completely normal to launch *Quake* and jump into a server (or the original *Tribes*, for that matter). The difference is that *Tribes: Ascend* released in 2012, which is just recent enough to make it an oddity. These days, online games that aren't hits get demolished and paved over before they even finish 'beta testing'. There's no secret way to play

TYLER WILDE



THIS MONTH
Wandered into a game that was supposed to be empty.

ALSO PLAYED
Rainbow Six Siege,
Wilderness

Crucible, the cancelled Amazon-made hero shooter. In October, you will no longer be able to play *Magic: Legends*, which was only in beta for a few months before the decision was made to start planning the controlled demolition. If they don't make money, games just go away now.

But then there's *Tribes: Ascend* – forgotten, but not gone. You can't find it on Steam by searching for it, but it hasn't been removed from Steam. It's just been delisted. Check out this URL to see for yourself: store.steampowered.com/app/17080.

From that store page, you can add *Tribes: Ascend* to your Steam account for free and then download it in the Steam client. When you run it, you might see an error. It complains to me about “install proxy 2”, but after I dismiss that, it loads a login screen. Enter your Hi-Rez account credentials (you can make an account at hirezstudios.com if you don't have one) and into the pocket dimension you go. It's all still there: the loadout menu, the tutorials, the server browser. And there are people playing. *Tribes: Ascend* is not dead.

Why the fast, high-skill FPS never caught on has been debated to death.

WHY THE FAST, HIGH-SKILL FPS NEVER CAUGHT ON HAS BEEN DEBATED TO DEATH



Nailing the timing of a fusion mortar explosion is a tricky business.



I didn't remember there being throwing knives in Tribes, but I'm into them.

Was it bad luck? Bad design? Bad monetisation? Was it a little of each? Yeah, probably.

GO TO WAR

Joining a *Tribes: Ascend* server the other day was thrilling, though. With such a small set of players, I wondered if they'd bristle at a newcomer. Not at all. We just chatted with voice commands like the old days: Hi. Yes. Shazbot! Woohoo! Awesome! (I kept absentmindedly looking for my *Rocket League* quick chats, since the tone is so similar: Wow! OK. Nice shot!)

One of the players seemed to be new to the game, and was contemplating which weapons were the best – it was fun to see someone unburdened by years of arguments over weapon design. Another was clearly an old vet, racking up kills with the fusion mortar, one of my all-time favourite videogame weapons (it shoots a green flare that can arc across half the map before exploding). There were only five or so of us at the peak, so instead of capturing the enemy flag, I usually just dropped it somewhere and stood next to it, waiting for a fight. It was one of the best times I've had in a game recently. ■

The endless flood of microtransactions doesn't help with the immersion.



“It all feels weirdly beneath him”

Feeling like a cosplayer in **MARVEL'S AVENGERS**

ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Watched an unhealthy amount of Marvel movies.

ALSO PLAYED
Assassin's Creed Valhalla,
Legends of Runeterra

Superheroes are a particularly difficult thing to get right in a videogame. They shouldn't be, in theory – power fantasy is gaming's bread and butter, and loads of game protagonists have supernatural abilities anyway. But in practice it requires a delicate balance.

Marvel's Avengers perfectly illustrates the potential pitfalls, sadly by falling afoul of most of them.

The game begins with an attack on the Golden Gate Bridge – the Avengers swoop in to try and stop it. I first get to charge into battle as the mighty Thor, whirling Mjolnir.

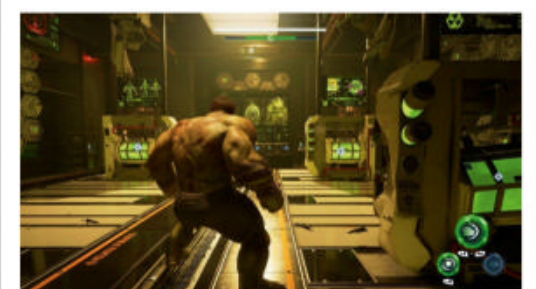
The thing is, the enemies aren't aliens or super-soldiers or robots, they're just... guys. Dudes in body armour with guns. And, understandably for a tutorial level, they go down easy after a few whacks. The result is I don't feel like a superhero overcoming great evil, I feel like a bully. The wider context of the Marvel universe is unavoidable baggage – I'm acutely aware of not only how powerful Thor is, but of his moral compass. It all feels weirdly beneath him.

And the funny thing is, when things swing the other way, that's no good either. As combat difficulty quickly escalates, and paramilitary thugs are replaced with high-tech robots, you frequently feel pillow-fisted. When a nameless android can take a right hook from the Hulk without even flinching, the illusion is immediately shattered. This isn't the Hulk, it's just an everyday action game protagonist wearing a big, green costume.

HERO TO ZERO

A delicate balance, you see? And the more videogame-y layers *Avengers* slathers on – like gating basic abilities behind level ups, or constantly forcing you into menus to fiddle with loot, or sending Ms Marvel hurtling down into the abyss every time you fluff an awkward platforming sequence – the more any feeling of superheroics is lost.

Marvel's Avengers isn't bad, really – the story's solid enough, it looks nice, and you have to applaud its grand ambition. But none of its eight heroes (and counting) really *feel* like the ones we know from comics, films, or TV in play, and that's a problem you can't punch your way past. ■



“The world is a stage upon which the game plays out, not the main feature”

MAFIA: DEFINITIVE EDITION remembers when open-world games weren't second jobs

I recently found myself searching for a new open-world game to waste away the hours with, but discovered that I'd already played all the decent ones. I fired up *Days Gone* hoping for a diverting, zombie-filled road trip, but I couldn't drive for a single mile without someone awful interrupting me. Then I gave *Just Cause 4* a try, but I think I've had my fill of explosions and terrible dialogue. So I gave up and sought solace in a familiar friend.

Mafia: Definitive Edition is an old classic with a fresh coat of paint. The 2020 version takes Illusion Softworks' 2002 crime romp and, courtesy of *Mafia 3* developer Hangar 13, gives it the look and feel of a modern open-world caper. Importantly, though, it retains a crucial element that sets it apart from the likes of *GTA* and *Assassin's Creed*: the world is a stage upon which the game plays out, not the main feature.

In 2021, the rules of open-world games are very well defined. We've had decades of them. While Rockstar's might be the most iconic,

▶ FRASER BROWN



THIS MONTH
Did some crimes, but didn't feel pressured.

ALSO PLAYED
Wildermyst,
Chivalry 2

Ubisoft is the publisher who has really defined how they work. How you explore them, and what you find when you explore, is almost always the same, whether it's near-future London or ancient Greece. Built before all of this, however, *Mafia* isn't laden with years of crap, and ends up feeling rather novel.

The city of Lost Heaven houses plenty of collectables and, through a free roam mode, can be explored for as long as you like, but most of the time it just serves as a convincing backdrop, never interrupting the story with side activities like raiding

hideouts or taking friends bowling. When you're in a mission, that's all you need to focus on, and when you're done with it you're whisked away to the next chapter of the engaging criminal saga.

CAN'T REFUSE

It does wonders for the pace of the narrative. After a few hours, I've already been a mobster for a few years, and I've got friends, rivals and a gal. Instead of needing to take up street racing or poker to earn money for more cars and gear, the story gives me exactly what I need for the mission at hand.

None of this is to say that I haven't squeezed plenty of enjoyment out of less restrained open worlds. I played *Red Dead Redemption II* for 150 hours and still hop into *Red Dead Online* every now and then. I played *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* for just as long, and I've already got plans to return once all the DLC has been released. I love to lose myself in these worlds, even when that time is often spent on meaningless diversions. But what a treat it is to play something that feels epic without demanding I also put in an epic amount of work. ■

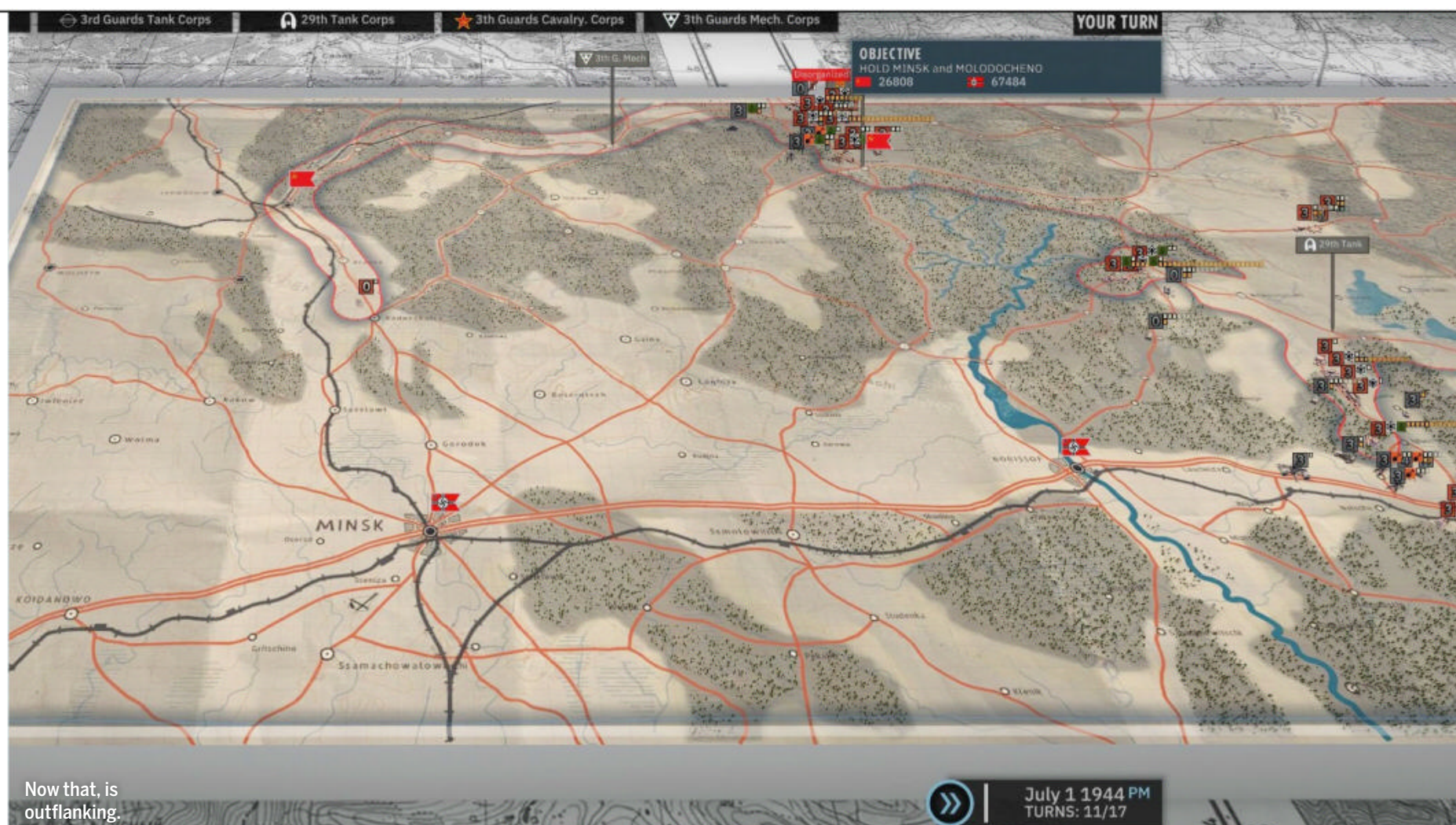
THE STORY GIVES ME EXACTLY WHAT I NEED FOR THE MISSION AT HAND



LEFT: It's one of the best dressed open worlds.

BELOW: I cry whenever I scratch one of these classic cars.





“What if the 2nd & 3rd Panzers had continued onto Moscow in August?”

Facing down nested menus and the Wehrmacht in **STEEL DIVISION II**

In the tension between childhood in the WWII-mad '70s and having German relatives, I developed a life-long horrified fascination with the whole thing.

Not for me are the superficial delights of *Battlefield*-style shooters though. I need huge, sweeping simulations of the Eastern front, dripping in appropriate misery. My brain hums with counter-possibilities. What if the 2nd & 3rd Panzers had continued onto Moscow in August? And I want receipts.

So, I see a game like *Steel Division II* and I want it. I want to be good at it, I want to have time for it. It's the kind of game that I acquire during a Steam sale, carefully hoovering up all the DLC... then never, ever play.

Because I hate base-building, I hate resource management, and fear the menus. Give me a few good men, or something and let me get on with it. The problem is I'm lazy, or at least, I have issues with my concentration. Yet, I have 525 games on Steam that I

MATT KILLEEN



THIS MONTH
Liberated Minsk but burned down a lot of villages.

ALSO PLAYED
Ghost Recon Wildlands,
Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak

haven't even installed. I decided that a random number generator would select my next game and *Steel Division II* was the winner.

The strategic level is relatively simple, if you auto-resolve the engagements. It's a straightforward numbers game with modifiers. My head could get round this much. I'm not creating barracks, or researching technologies for fear of fielding inadequate tanks. It did take me a while to realise that I should ignore the retreating Germans and take the

Red Army round them. I love a circuitous outflanking manoeuvre, but usually I'm still blundering across a distant hillside as the battle ends.

ALL OUT

Anyway, I finally get a Katyusha. I know all about this scarily-effective multiple rocket launcher. She devastates my advancing enemy in the most exhilarating way possible and in a few short seconds. Then she's out of ammo... and nothing happens. Turns out the game hasn't seen fit to offer me a supply truck yet.

But another minute has passed. I have more points and the enemy has probably spent theirs. Tanks! Tanks are good, right? But I've used them all. A huge column of my armour was picked off while I fiddled with something else. I begin shovelling support units and trucks onto the front line as it ripples towards me, each destroyed on arrival. I am sacrificing the cream of Soviet youth for nothing more than the slightest chance to stave off the fascists... I suppose I wanted historical realism, and there it is. ■

I KNOW ALL ABOUT THIS SCARILY-EFFECTIVE MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHER



PHASMOPHOBIA

Smarter ghosts haunt the co-op's recent updates. *By Rachel Watts*

Phasmophobia's mix of rag-doll comedy and moments that make my blood run cold is the reason why it's been my multiplayer group's go-to game for the past year. That balance has been great for someone like me who's easily spooked, but Kinetic Games has been slowly fixing the game's jank and turning it into pure horror. It's not quite there yet, but *Phasmophobia* isn't the loveable glitchy jumble it once was. Its horror streak has gotten much more sinister, and as brilliant as it is, I'm not sure how many more updates I can take.

Phasmophobia's ghost list has now risen from twelve to fourteen with the introduction of the Yokai and Hantu – it looks like Kinetic has been delving into some Japanese and Indonesian folklore. The Hantu is a hyper-fast phantom that speeds up when the building gets cold, meaning players will now have to pay extra attention to fixing the fuse box that powers the building's heat.

The Hantu is a fun addition, but the Yokai is what you need to watch out for. It's a ghost that becomes

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sept 18 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Kinetic Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
kineticgames.co.uk

more aggressive when players speak, meaning your investigations just got eerily quiet – they'll be no more joking around here. Just make sure you hold your breath when it's wandering around and you'll be fine... most of the time.

Another scary addition is now the ghost AI is a lot smarter. Long past are the days where you could run loops around our phantom friends and hop quickly into a closet. They now have a 50% chance of remembering where they last saw you and will search that area when they begin hunting again. And what's worse, they now have the ability to open closets and locker doors, with your only defence being to hold on to the door's handles to try and shut them out.

If you manage to really anger one, your weedy little arms will be no good and the ghost will bust the doors open, your closet then becoming a coffin.

SCREAM OF THE CROP

With the safe haven of closets ripped away from players, Kinetic Games was kind enough to provide some more hiding opportunities. As long as you are out of the ghost's line of sight, players can now hide behind furniture. Before the update, they would have been able to see you instantly, but this new feature introduces new survival techniques, making you take more risks. The tension of scuttling behind a couch, praying the poltergeist doesn't see or hear you as you listen to its heavy footsteps against the wooden floorboards is like nothing else. It's a great addition that brings you closer



IT BRINGS YOU CLOSER TO THE GHOSTS THAN EVER BEFORE

to the ghosts than ever before.

There are plenty of smaller changes and fixes too, which you can read about on *Phasmophobia*'s Steam page, but there are still a handful of issues. The Asylum map, to put it bluntly, is still the worst map in the game. It's massive and has loads of rooms, delaying the ghostly confrontation. It's a map where you spend the majority of the time trying to find the right haunting room instead of chasing the actual ghost (or it chasing you). Crucifixes are also still a drag. It's an item that feels like it should have some dramatic heft behind it, but that's deflated by how unreliable it is. It's difficult to even see if the effect of the crucifix has worked – maybe Kinetic should try having it emit a blinding beam of holy light when you chuck it on the floor.

Saying all that, *Phasmophobia* is still in Early Access and is coming up to its one-year anniversary this September. The team's plan is to release the full game in 2021, but with plenty of changes to go, I'm not sure about that timeline.

I still love *Phasmophobia*, it's a phenomenal co-op horror game and its Early Access builds have given me, and many others, hours of fun. But with updates bringing in smarter ghosts and spookier mechanics, I don't know if I'll have the stones to play the game when it does eventually hit 1.0. ■

BUSTIN' MAKES ME FEEL GOOD

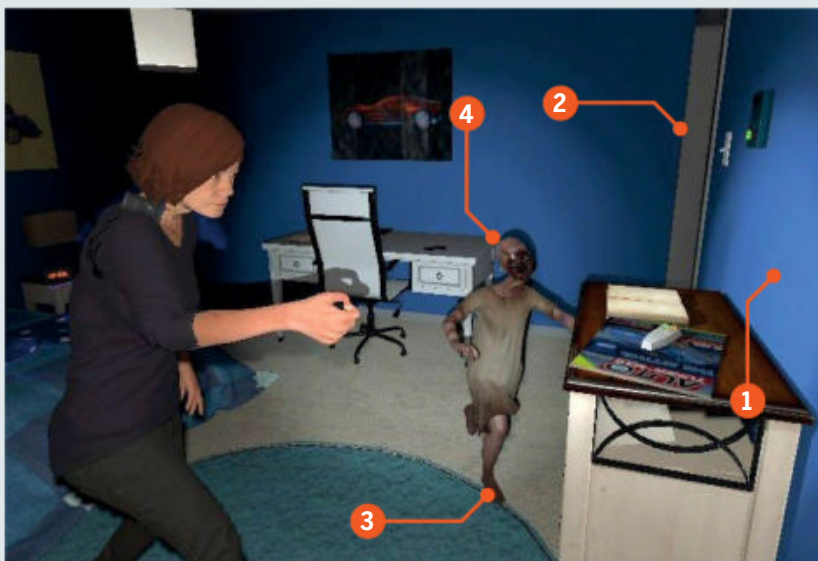
With smarter spirits, you might want a reminder of what to look out for

1 FLASHING TORCHES

This is the first signifier that the hunt has begun – duck behind some furniture or skedaddle to a closet or locker.

2 DOORS

If you hear doors opening on their own, that means the ghost is checking near your hiding spot, maybe even in the room you're in.



3 FOOTSTEPS

The ghosts in *Phasmophobia* are a stompy bunch. Just make sure to stay as quiet as you can when you hear them pass by your hiding spot.

4 GHOST GASP

If you hear a ghostly exhale, one of your mates has definitely died, but that means you have survived the hunt. Congratulations!



ABOVE: You're not really friends until you've all hidden in a closet from a murderous ghost.

LEFT: There's no graceful way to die in *Phasmophobia*.



Looking at the truck's monitors is like watching a horror movie unfold.

Caption about the
image goes in
here



ABOVE: Attaching multiple wolves to carts proved tricky.

RIGHT: You can ride a wolf by pressing Shift+E.



VALHEIM

Mods to put your tamed wolves to work. *By Sarah James*



LEFT: It's time they were given more than just guard duty.

BELOW: A cart is surprisingly easy to attach to a wolf.



Valheim is an easy game to fall in love with. The exploration, the crafting, the base-building – all of it had me hurrying through real-life tasks so I could get back to the Viking afterlife as quickly as possible. I honestly didn't think I could have been any more excited about it – and then I found out that not only are there wolves in the game, but you can tame them too.

To say I got a little carried away may be a bit of an understatement. Two wolves became three, became ten, then suddenly it seemed like my entire base – and the surrounding countryside – was inundated with the goodest of boys (and, apparently, girls). And they aren't limited to my base either. I'll often be sailing down a river and see a wolf on the bank chasing some poor deer into the water. It somehow makes the world feel more alive and lived in. Before long, I had a small army that could take down invading trolls within seconds. But I got to thinking: why should they stop at guard duty? Surely I could put my wolves to work some other way?

The idea came to me as I was browsing mods. I hadn't used any with *Valheim*, but it's cool to see what weird and wonderful things people

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 2, 2021

DEVELOPER
Iron Gate AB

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain

LINK
valheimgame.com

have come up with. This time, a couple of mods caught my eye and immediately got me thinking about my wolf army and how I could get more use out of them.

CART LIFE

First up, the *Beasts of Burden* mod lets you attach carts to any tamed animal in *Valheim*. It also adds the

IT SEEMED THAT THIS MOD COULD PUT AN END TO MY PROBLEMS

'follow' command to boars and lox, which is super handy if you hope to control where the contents of your cart are taken. Anyone that's played *Valheim* for more than a couple of hours knows how annoying it is to transport large amounts of material from one location to another. It's fun at first, especially when you discover carts, but becomes pretty tedious after a few trips. It seemed that this mod could put an end to my problems – and put my wolves to work into the bargain.

The real icing on the cake, however, is the *Mount Up* mod. This one allows you to use any tamed animal as a mount. I mean, how perfect is that? Especially if both mods work together. The walking speed when mounted on a wolf is pretty slow but you can 'sprint' by holding the Shift key – and it doesn't use stamina either. Though if you're

LONG HAUL *Moving materials in the Viking afterlife*



CART

It can be tricky over rough terrain but it gives you a lot of capacity for early on.



LONGSHIP

The best way to move large quantities of ore. The smaller karve works in a pinch.



PORTAL

You can't take ore through portals but it's a great way to move other stuff.



MEGINGJORD

You can buy this belt from the Trader to increase your carry weight to 450.

prone to motion sickness, you might need to adjust the settings a little to reduce the swaying. But still, I can already see myself riding at the head of a train of wolves, Frostner in hand, transporting precious cargo from one location to another. So with a plan firmly in mind, I loaded up my newly modded *Valheim* game.

After whipping up a cart at my nearest crafting table, I tried hitching it to a wolf and was surprised by how well it works. Just get the wolf to follow you so it's standing close to the cart, interact with the cart as you would usually, and it attaches to the wolf. And as a bonus, you can indeed ride a wolf pulling a cart by holding Shift+E. Now we're talking.

The only slight downside is that, despite having a vast number of wolves, I'm not able to put them all to work – not simultaneously anyway. *Valheim* restricts the 'follow' command to four animals by default. That's probably for the best – even four carts will take a fair amount of time to fill. Carts can also be difficult to pull over rough terrain, so I choose a clear path across the meadows.

I need more stone to finish building the walls around my harbour, and I know just the spot to gather some. I collect the materials I'll need to make four carts, put four wolves on follow, and head out. Once I've found a decent spot, I let the wolves wander as I set about gathering the stone and loading it into the carts. I'm not going to fill the carts completely because that would take far too long, and honestly, I'm not sure how this will go.

DANCES WITH WOLVES

As it turns out, attaching carts to multiple wolves isn't as easy as you might think. I initially had them all follow me, and secured the first cart to one wolf – easy, until it knocked over the second cart as soon as it turned to face me. I tried a few times

to realign them all, but that just ended with a pile of overturned carts and howling wolves.

Once I'd untangled wolf from cart and put everything back in a neat line, I decided to change tactics. Putting one wolf on follow at a time, I attached the cart, then let them wander. I repeated this with the remaining three. Everything was going to plan until I mounted one and recalled the rest to me.

Wolves like to group up when they follow you, but they take up considerably more space when towing a cart. It started well, but then as they all converged behind me the carts overturned, suspending the wolves in the air. OK, so four carts may have been a bit ambitious – I decided to try again with three.

This worked surprisingly well. After some initial shuffling, the wolves behind me settled on walking side-by-side, just behind the cart my own wolf was pulling. I kept a slow pace so as not to disturb the formation, and we made good progress. For a while, at least.

The first mishap was when I stopped to repair the carts, and one of the trailing wolves decided that it seemed an appropriate time to give birth. I'd fed the wolves before we set off to give them the 'happy' status – I didn't want to deal with disgruntled workers on the first trip, after all – but the wolves had other ideas. New life is a beautiful thing. But perhaps not so much when the new life in question's first memory is getting run over by a cart. The wolf cub was fine, and soon wandered off, so we continued on our way.

We'd only gone a little further when one of the carts got stuck on a tree. As I was pondering the least disruptive way to retrieve it, one wolf broke formation and ran off after a deer that clearly needed to be taken care of right now. Luckily, the cart followed, but both wolf and cart

managed to take out several saplings and a small bush before the cart overturned and the wolf came wandering back looking embarrassed.

It took several minutes to get the cart back up the right way and attached once more, then several more to get the tree-bound cart and set the two trailing wolves to follow



WOLVES LIKE TO GROUP UP WHEN THEY FOLLOW YOU

in the nice side-by-side formation they'd had previously. It didn't help when one cart hit a rock, tipped backwards, and pushed its wolf flailing into the air. I wasn't far from home now though, and the rest of the journey went without mishap.

WORK WONDERS

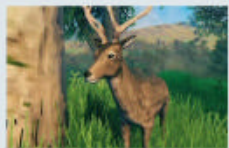
While I haven't started the industrial-scale wolf haulage operation I had in mind, there's still some fun to be found with these mods. It's certainly helpful to have a wolf pull an extra cart from one area of your base to another, and using them as mounts has many possibilities when exploring.

It's worth remembering that *Valheim* doesn't officially support mods, so it's a good idea to back up your world and characters before you install any. You wouldn't want to put all your hard work at risk, and it's as simple as copying a couple of folders to a safe location. You can always make another world if you want to test something out before applying it to your main world too if you want that added peace of mind.

Now I'm tempted to try out other mods. I'm guilty of having several different worlds on the go because I can't stop searching for that perfect spot for an extravagant base that I never seem to get around to finishing. So I'm keen to try out the *Better Continents* mod, which gives a much more natural structure to the way terrain and biomes are generated within the world. Failing that, the *Bow of Madness* mod looks like a very satisfying way of altering large parts of your world's terrain.

For now though, I'm going to let my wolves have a well-deserved rest. These mods were great to test out, but I think I will keep my furry friends solely for guard duty. ■

ANIMAL MAGIC *More animal-centric mods*



REALISTIC ANIMAL SOUNDS
Deer should feel called out. Works for boars and lox too.



AUTO FEED
Allows tamed animals to eat from a chest – no more guilt if you forget to feed them.



LOX BREEDING
Now you can overrun your base with lox as well as wolves.



NAME YOUR TAME
Give your pets their own names – or someone else's.



TELEPORT WOLVES
Because your entire world needs to be overrun with them.



ABOVE: The mods are great but I'll keep my wolves on guard duty.

LEFT: Keeping four wolves and carts in a sensible formation proved difficult.



I've acquired a few wolves while playing.



MASTER CHAINS OF DOMINATION

Tick off these tasks to succeed in *WoW*'s 9.1 update. *By Sarah James*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Ongoing

VITAL LINKS

Shadowlands flying:
bit.ly/3xDXpk3

Torghast guide:
bit.ly/3e9P7Zy

WoW beginner tips:
bit.ly/2UzPBxy



KORTHIA CALLING

1 Korthia is a brand new sub-zone you can visit in the Maw and it's worth making sure you have access to it. It unlocks after a short intro questline, and is home to a full quest hub with various new factions and activities for you to discover.



BRAVE THE MAW

2 Now you'll have the ability to ride ground mounts around the Maw, making daily and weekly quests here much less of a chore to complete. In fact, the zone becomes almost enjoyable – especially for slower classes – as it's much easier to get around.



DAILY LIFE

3 There are some new daily quests to pick up and complete in Korthia, as well as one weekly mission. These can grant you new gear, faction reputation, even and legendary crafting materials, so it's well worth keeping up with them whenever you can.



RARE FIND

4 The new Korthia zone may be small, but it's home to a number of new, rare enemies to track down and kill. Some will reward cosmetic items such as transmog or toys, while others can drop mounts.



RANK UP

5 To gain ranks in Korthia's new Archivist's Codex faction, you'll need to collect 'Catalogued Research' by looting chests and killing enemies in and around the new sub-zone. Research is also used to upgrade Korthian catch-up gear.



COVENANT ASSAULTS

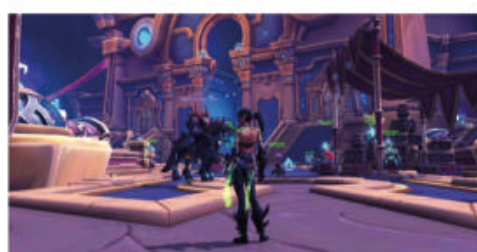
6 Twice weekly, a different Covenant will attack the forces in the Maw. You can help them out by completing a number of quests and taking down a mini-boss to gain rewards such as Soul Cinders, gear, and reputation.



REP GRIND

7 Increasing Death's Advance reputation lets you buy gear with domination sockets that you can't get from the new raid. You'll also need to be 'friendly' with this faction to purchase Korthian Armaments, the new catch-up gear.

FOR INSTANCE *Venture into the new Sanctum of Domination raid*



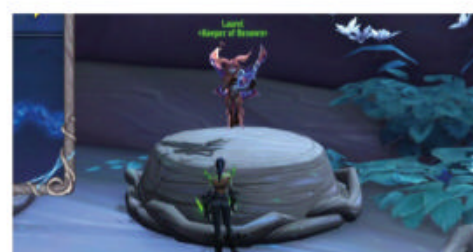
MEGA FUN

8 Try out the new mega-dungeon, Tazavesh, The Veiled Market. Containing eight bosses, it's larger than regular dungeons and is similar in size to Return to Karazhan and Operation: Mechagon from the last two expansions. It takes longer, too.



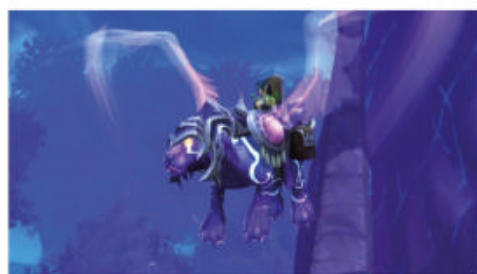
TOWER POWER

9 Torghast has been overhauled, giving you a ranking based on your performance or speed. New layers and floors have been added and you can earn a new legendary currency, as well as unlock additional powers via a talent tree system.



WELL RENOWNED

10 The covenant Renown level cap has been increased to 80, up from 60. Building Renown levels with your covenant lets you unlock additional chapters in the covenant campaign, more Soulbind rows and cosmetic items, such as transmog pieces.



FLYING HIGH

11 If you've been waiting to fly in the Shadowlands zones, you're in luck. Once you've reached Renown level 44 with your covenant and completed The Last Sigil campaign chapter, you'll be able to take to the skies in the afterlife.



ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE

12 New account-bound catch-up gear is available from Korthia which is useful for alts. You can purchase it from the Death's Advance quartermaster, or alternatively, it has a chance to drop from rares and as some daily quest rewards.



CRUSADER KINKS

PART II

Continuing the raunchy reign
of King Randy Cockburn.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1. Ruler can only marry characters with the lustful trait (and if possible should have it themselves)

2. If romantic opportunities arise, they must be pursued.

3. Chaste characters must be expelled from court immediately.

Last time in King Randy of Scotland's quest to roger his way to glory in *Crusader Kings III*, I left him preparing to, ah, insert himself into the marriage of Petty King Gudrød Haraldsen and his wife Princess Ragnhild. This isn't solely because Ragnhild is far too comely to be lumbered with a mere Petty King, although it certainly sweetens the deal. Specifically, I want to break up Gudrød's alliance with Ragnhild's father, King Olav III of Norway, thereby softening up Scotland's western isles for conquest.

Despite a 95% chance of success in Randy's seduction scheme, however, Princess Ragnhild rejects his advances! What could she possibly not see in a middle-aged monarch whose hobbies include sleeping with the pox-ridden King of Sweden?

King Randy hasn't been rejected before. He takes it well, immediately setting up a new plot to murder Princess Ragnhild. But then I notice Norway is currently embroiled in two different wars, which means Olav probably won't have many reinforcements to help a Petty King cling on to Scotland's right arse-cheek. I take the gamble and declare war on Gudrød. Norway joins the war immediately, but its army never shows up, and I sweep aside Gudrød's meagre forces with ease. Sometimes it's best to skip foreplay and get straight down to business.

With all of Scotland bar the northernmost tip under his control (Randy has always had trouble controlling his tip) the king is feeling pretty good about himself. The game recognises it to, notifying me that Randy has earned enough renown to unlock a dynastic legacy, a house trait that will be passed down through the generations. After exactly five seconds of deliberation, I select 'Bounteous Loins'.

On the subject of bounteous loins, Randy finds a way to put the ever-ripening fruits of his to use. 'Helen\\$', Randy's unfortunately named daughter, has come of age. As Randy seeks a husband for her, he discovers that King Olav has recently lost his wife. Within moments, King Olav has a brand new wife, and King Randy has a powerful new ally. Helen\\$ doesn't get a say, because the medieval world was dreadful.

Everything seems to be going gravy for Randy when he is suddenly dealt two crushing blows. One of Randy's

earls reveals that Duke Gospatric, Randy's Chancellor, long-time lover, and soulmate, is cheating on him with a lad named William. Conveniently ignoring the fact that he has several lovers himself, Randy issues an ultimatum – it's me or him. Gospatric chooses William. "Nothing compares to it," he says. "Not even you." Ouch.

TIL DEATH DO US PART

Mere days after this arrow through Randy's heart, the Grim Reaper rips it out and stamps on it. Queen Ximena, Randy's wife of 20 years, keels over dead. Randy may have cheated on her liberally, but his feelings for her were genuine, and the seven children they had seemed to have

THE STRESS OF LOSING BOTH HIS WIFE AND HIS SOULMATE IS TOO MUCH FOR RANDY

been borne from genuine affection.

The combined stress of losing both his wife and his soulmate is too much for Randy, and he suffers a mental breakdown. The only solace he finds is at the bottom of a whisky bottle, and he gains the drunkard trait. Wracked by grief, guilt, and booze, he decides to openly announce his four bastard children, all of whom were borne by his second lover, his lowborn courtier Malmure.

For Randy, this mistake is costly. He gains the 'Adulterer' trait and is considered a sinner in the eyes of the church. For poor Malmure, however, it's catastrophic. Not only is she shunned by her husband Owain, who Randy set her up with as a sort-of apology for leaving her with four of his kids to look after, but all those children are formally moved into Randy's household, leaving Malmure with nobody. She dies shortly afterward under mysterious circumstances, likely murdered by Owain.

This terrible run of events leaves Randy bruised, but still standing. Well, certain parts of him are, anyway. He begins his recovery by searching for a new wife. I scroll through the list of available ladies, and am somewhat baffled by the appearance of a Mòrag Cockburn. At first I wonder whether this is one of Randy's children that

I've forgotten about, he isn't exactly short of them. But it turns out to be pure coincidence, as there's a second, much smaller House Cockburn in Scotland

BIG LOVE

Regardless, Mòrag fits Randy's bill. She has the lustful trait, while her character pages notes that she is a 'giant'. Statistically, this gives her a five-point deduction in attractiveness, demonstrating *Crusader Kings III* is yet to kneel at the altar of Lady Dimitrescu. For his part, Randy likes to sample love in all its flavours, and is wedded to Brienne of Airth within days.

No sooner are nuptials attended to than Randy's prowling for other covers to slip between. Duke Gospatric slinks back into the picture, »

BELOW: One advantage of lots of children is lots of potential alliances.





THE FAMILY FOREST

The extensive fruits of Randy's loins



CHILDREN WITH XIMENA

Rodina
Randy
Helen
Alastair
Elspeth
Hector
Isabel

CHILDREN WITH MÒRAG

Mary
Mòrag

BASTARDS WITH MALMURE

Colin
Waldev
Malmure
Aileen

BASTARDS WITH QUEEN GISLA OF AQUITAINE

Jacme

» making not-so-subtle advances toward Randy. I consider telling him to go boil his head, but sex is a great stress reliever for Randy, and a dalliance with Gospatric will reset his stress level to zero. Randy has bigger ideas, too. He's already enjoyed an affair with a king (riddled with venereal disease though Erik of Sweden may have been), and according to contemporary medical advice, it would be of great imbalance to his humours if he didn't pursue a fling with a Queen.

Randy casts his roving eye across Europe. It returns with a finger in it. Nearly all the queens of western Europe are docile, zealously religious types, morally opposed to a roll in the hay with a sinful drunkard. Everything east of Byzantium, meanwhile is too distant for meaningful character interactions. He does manage strike up an affair with the 'Queen' of Aquitaine. But let's face it, Aquitaine is not at real country. At best it's a duchy with ideas above its station.

Fortunately, it isn't long before fate intervenes. William the Conqueror dies, leaving the throne of England to some piffing 14-year-old teenager, but he's betrothed to a woman rather amusingly named Amburga. Randy once had an affair with Amburga when

she visited his court, presumably allured by her seedy buns. It turns out she still holds affection for him, providing an opportunity to become very personally acquainted with the future Queen of England.

Randy begins to pursue Amburga like a hungry man in McDonald's. Unfortunately, things get off to a bad start, as I accidentally click the 'Romance' scheme rather than the 'Seduction' scheme. And it gets worse from there. By the time his romance scheme completes, the young King of England has "died under mysterious circumstances", and has been replaced by Queen Hermine, flipping Amburga right out of contention. Instead of sinking his teeth into a Big Tasty, Randy has ended up pledging his soul to the Saver Menu. I would say it should teach him not to eat fast food, but it would be a hiding to nothing.

Randy stops chasing queens for now, and instead focussing on expanding Scottish territory into Ireland, nibbling away at the provinces of Ulster and Oriel. Tragedy strikes once more, however, when Randy's second-eldest son Alastair is grievously wounded in combat. Randy hires a physician to save him, but the quack botches the operation and Alastair dies.

This is followed by further misfortune. Days later, Duke Gospatric also dies, in a manner almost identical to that of Alastair. It's a particularly gruesome death, Gospatric's character page notes he was "brutally mauled" by his incompetent doctor, while his portrait wears a black mask to conceal the damage. The double-shot of grief is too much for Randy, and he suffers a second breakdown, this time taking to brothels to distract himself from the loss.

I SPY

At this point, Randy's sex life takes a turn for the surreal. He takes on a new lover, a young woman named Euá, and is enjoying a nightcap with her when in walks the Duchess Gruoch, who happens to be Randy's Spymaster. Either Gruoch is terrible at her job, or she planned this. Unfazed, Randy calmly asks his mistress of whispers to join in the fun. Which she does! No sooner has Gruoch left Randy's bed, she joins a rebellion against him to free the Gaelic province of Buchan from his control. There's poor performance, and there's inciting revolt from your own Spymaster.

No sooner has Randy dealt with this bit of sexual whiplash, he has a conversation with his wife Mòrag in which she intimates that she likes to lie with horses, by which I don't mean she enjoys telling them fibs. Mòrag's revelations earn her the trait 'Deviant'. Frankly, I'd be surprised if Randy wasn't likeminded, but mercifully he doesn't get the chance to explore this, ah, equestrian take on an open marriage. Shortly after the reveal, Mòrag dies abruptly. For a moment I worry what exactly it is she died of, but her character page reveals the cause of death as gout. While unpleasant, it's far preferable to what I had imagined.

Randy deals with his grief in two ways: marrying a third time (to a woman whose name I genuinely can't remember) and arranging for





THAT HUSBAND IS DEAD NOW, LEAVING RANDY FREE TO DO WHAT RANDY DOES BEST

his daughter Isabel to marry Benoit, the new King of France. In the process, he discovers that Benoit is gay, and cannot resist the idea of bedding a hot new king.

Sleeping with the husband of one of his daughters is probably the single most King Randy thing King Randy has ever done. His eldest daughter Rodina berates him for being a “Lecherous Bedswerver”. Bizarrely, this outburst makes Randy *less* stressed. It seems Rodina has been in a Polish prison for several years, and Randy takes her anger as a sign that she’s coping with her ordeal. I don’t grok the logic, but let’s face it, Randy lives on a different planet. One where all the trees are suggestively shaped, and where you *really* don’t want to go paddling in the oceans.

By this point Randy is in his 60s, but he hasn’t let go of his plan to bed the Queen of England. There have been several English queens since his last effort. The latest is Queen Cecilia, who is also the ruler of England, rather than being wife to a King. Randy considered approaching her earlier, but a seduction scheme would have proved futile

because she “loves her husband” like a loser. Luckily, that husband is dead now, leaving Randy free to do what Randy does best.

I should point out that Randy is attempting his latest lech having just beaten Queen Cecilia in a war over the county of Dunbar. A bunch of civil wars in the wake of King William’s death left England militarily weak, and Randy used his alliance with Norway to strongarm Dunbar back across the Scottish border. “I stole your land, wanna come back to my place?” is one hell of a pick-up line, but Randy’s overcome worse odds before. He puts on the charm and before he knows it, Princess Cecilia is wrapped around his finger.

HOLD ON. PRINCESS CECILIA?!

Oh for the love of, well, everyone. It turns out Queen Cecilia has been overthrown, the throne now belonging to King William II. Randy’s quest to seduce the Queen of England has failed again, and sadly, he won’t get a third chance.

At the age of 65, King Randy dies in his favourite place, his bed. It may not quite be doing what he loves, but it’s a better death than most can ask for in the medieval world, and frankly a better one that he probably deserves. He leaves the throne to his eldest son, the equally Randy II. There isn’t time nor space to tell his tale, but let’s be honest, he’d struggle to live up to his dad. ■

ABOVE: A low point for King Randy.

LOWER LEFT: Benoit bonk.



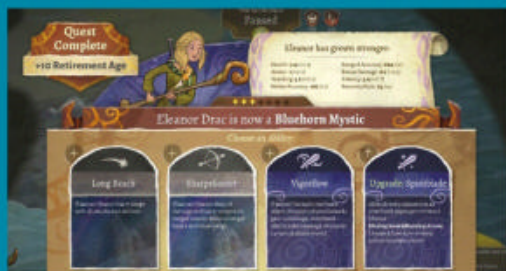


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

CHARACTER HUMANITY IN WILDERMYTH

Heroes are more than stats and numbers on a character sheet. *By Rachel Watts*



LEFT: Why can't I have the option to choose ALL the abilities.

RIGHT: I can't describe the sheer joy I felt when two of the party fell in love.



I love a fantasy RPG with a good story, but aside from one main dude, it's difficult to give a party of five or more characters their own time in the spotlight. But after playing *Wilderness*, I came away with loads of stories about my group of hearty adventurers – so many I could write a book. And only after playing a handful of hours, too.

It's kind of incredible how a small games studio from Texas has managed to pull this off. *Wilderness* uses both crafted tales and procedural stories spun from character-driven traits to create a truly dynamic RPG. Characters fall in love, create bitter rivalries, grow old, have children, make terrible decisions, leave behind legacies, and eventually die. Everything they go through is folded neatly into the major story, and it's spectacular.

My *Wilderness* squad is named the Northern Slayers, a rag-tag group of women who enjoy a good punch up and friendly banter. There are hundreds of scripted micro-stories your party will slip into, although conversations change drastically depending on your team's personalities. One member of the crew, a loveable but snarky archer named Tess, had a luck feat and claimed that she could set off in a completely random direction and always come across some treasure. After a short adventure ending with a gorgon battle and zero loot, she didn't half get an earful of playful jests from the rest of the party.

It's these moments that make you feel like your group are actually good friends and not just a bunch of people

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Jun 15, 2021

DEVELOPER
Worldwalker Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

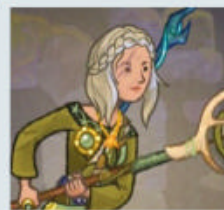
LINK
wilderness.com

SPELLBOUND *Here's my current badass group of heroes*



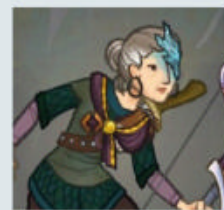
ARIANNA

A warrior who loves books and poetry. Realised her lifelong dream of finding the Library of Light and from then on decided to write down the party's adventures.



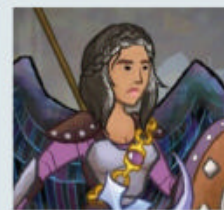
ELEANOR

A mystic who has a nasty scar, but it doesn't stop her from being a flirt. Nicked an egg from a Crag Eagle and now has a flying bird who brings her treasure.



TESS

A snarky archer that got caught by a gorgon. The monster left a mark on her face that has consumed one of her eyes. Wild at heart and a local legend.



FIONWAY

A rough-tongued blacksmith turned buff warrior. One night she met an old crow-woman who granted her two massive wings, the coolest thing ever.

thrown together for the sake of adventure. The vibe is very much like a D&D homebrew game. You don't just want to get more loot, you want your characters to be challenged, find friendship, and grow as people. They can fall in love and have kids who then join the adventuring gang when they're older. You can also have inter-party rivalries – two people who dislike one another will even gain critical hit buffs in battle as they try to one-up their rival.

THE JOURNEY YOUR CREW VENTURES ON TAKES A TOLL ON THE GROUP

The decisions you make in smaller stories will overlap into the larger one, and character developments can lead to some dramatic moments. When someone reaches zero health, you can decide if they die in a blaze of glory on the battlefield or retreat, losing a limb in the process. I made one of my characters withdraw in battle so she wouldn't be slain, and after the fight was over the leader of the party, a buff fighter named Arianna, made a heartfelt apology to the group.

WILD AT HEART

Similar to games like *Darkest Dungeon*, the journey your crew ventures on takes a toll on the group and you start to see scars and permanent injuries on their avatars. Sometimes it's because of a story beat, but more often than not, a character will get a permanent injury due to a bad decision you made on the battlefield.

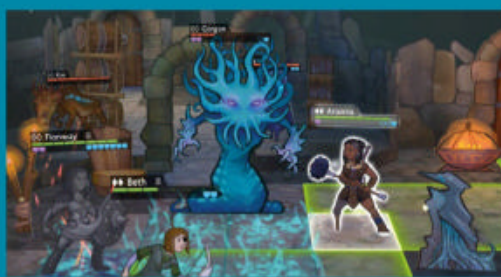
In between chapters, the land you're protecting goes through a handful of years of peace, meaning your characters get comic book-style panels showing what they got up to in those years of downtime. They can age and even retire – that's until you miss them so much you bring them back as 'legacy heroes' for a new campaign to show the young un's just how it's done, like reviving an old D&D character sheet for fun.

Wilderness is reminiscent of times playing tabletop RPGs with friends, each person carving their own story, but in *Wilderness* you have a say in the stories of all the characters, the game working its procedural magic behind the scenes. I've just started on my second run but can already tell I'm going to be in this for the long haul. I can't wait until all my heroes get old and I finally have a group of buff, badass grannies. ■



LEFT: A map showing the surrounding lands and the danger that approaches.

FAR RIGHT: The graphics may be cutesy, but battles are always a brutal affair.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



When the ocean swallows this place up, it'll be doing it a favour



BIOSHOCK 2

Revisiting *BioShock*'s bold, brilliant sequel. *By Andy Kelly*

When *BioShock 2* was released back in 2010, it had only been three years since we last got our feet wet in briny depths of Rapture. I remember feeling like the undersea dystopia was still relatively fresh in my mind, and had little desire to return. However, this sequel that nobody really wanted turned out to be confident, intelligent, and imaginative, matching the quality of the original, and in some ways bettering it. It's the story of a Big Daddy, Subject Delta, searching the decaying, leaky corridors of Rapture for his Little Sister, and butting heads with Sofia Lamb, the psychiatrist turned cult leader who betrayed him.

Rapture was in a bad way in *BioShock*, but a decade later it's in an

even worse state of disrepair. Entire districts of Andrew Ryan's monument to hubris are now completely submerged in ice-cold Atlantic sea water. The once lavish ballrooms, bars, and department stores are damp and rotten, crusted with barnacles. It's a vivid depiction of a place losing a battle with nature, and a highly effective setting. Still identifiably Rapture, but grimmer, dingier, and more hopeless.

It's also more dangerous, thanks to the presence of brute splicers – grotesque ADAM-powered giants – and the Big Sisters, an agile, powerful, and terrifying new kind of protector you have to contend with. When the ocean swallows this place up, it'll be doing it a favour...

DADDY COOL

Stepping into the clunky boots of a Big Daddy gives you a uniquely

interesting and more intimate perspective on the city. You aren't an outsider (or someone who *believes* they're an outsider) like Jack in the original game, but a key part of Rapture's bizarre ecosystem. Subject Delta, a prototype model, is different from the lumbering, groaning Big Daddies who stomp around the city protecting the Little Sisters. He has rather more free will, and a special, lifelong bond with one Little Sister in particular, Eleanor. If she dies, he dies, which gives him extra motivation to track her down, beyond just gene-induced fatherly love. From a story perspective, playing as a Big Daddy is actually an inspired idea. But in terms of actually moving around Rapture, you don't *really* feel like one.

There's very little weight to the controls. No real sense of being a towering, heavy figure clad in an iron diving suit. Even the drill, a trademark weapon of the Big Daddies, feels curiously feeble when

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2010

DEVELOPER
2K Marin

PUBLISHER
2K Games

LINK
www.bioshockgame.com



The classic one-two combo, made easier.

» you swing it. The first-person controls are basically identical to Jack's in the original game, which detracts a little from the sensation of *being* a Big Daddy. The game might not have been much fun if you spent the whole playtime slowly clomping around the expansive city of Rapture, but just a little more weight would've helped the illusion. I do like how you can hear the tap of water on your helmet when you stand under a leak, though. And occasionally, if the light hits you just right, you catch a glimpse of your hulking great

shadow, which reminds you that, oh yeah, I'm a Big Daddy, aren't I?

HARVEST BOON

You might not move like a Big Daddy, but you do occasionally act like one. At certain points in *BioShock 2* you have to protect a Little Sister as she goes about her rounds, sucking ADAM out of splicer corpses and recycling it. This is a neat way of making you a part of a dynamic you observed countless times back in the original game. When the Little Sister begins the harvest, waves of splicers

descend on her, which brings the sequel's improved combat to life. Being able to simultaneously wield a gun (or drill) in one hand and a Plasmid in the other is the most significant change, dramatically increasing the pace and aggression of battles, and letting you pull off power/weapon combos more fluidly.

Cold, calculating villain Sofia Lamb is the polar opposite of Andrew Ryan. He worshipped the ideal of the self, an objectivist, while Sofia believes in the power of the many. A communist, basically – exactly the kind of person Ryan feared might one day invade and conquer his city. She's an influential figure in Rapture, but why no mention of her in the first game? The real answer is, she hadn't been written yet. But in the game there's a hand-wave about her being imprisoned by Ryan and all traces of her teachings being hidden away from the masses. As an antagonist she doesn't have the charisma or zealous fire of Ryan, but her quiet ruthlessness does a good job of setting her apart.

One of the sequel's cleverest tricks is how your morality affects not only your own conscience, but Eleanor's story too. At several points in the

SHOCK AND AWE *The 'Shock series so far*



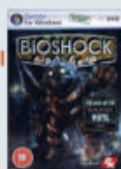
SYSTEM SHOCK 1994

This first-person cyberpunk RPG introduced the world to SHODAN, a malevolent artificial intelligence, and one of gaming's greatest villains.



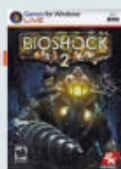
SYSTEM SHOCK 2 1999

This sequel, written and designed by *BioShock* creator Ken Levine, was hugely influential, setting the standard for immersive sims.



BIOSHOCK 2007

Designed as a spiritual successor to *System Shock*, *BioShock* moved the action from space in the future, to an undersea city in 1960.



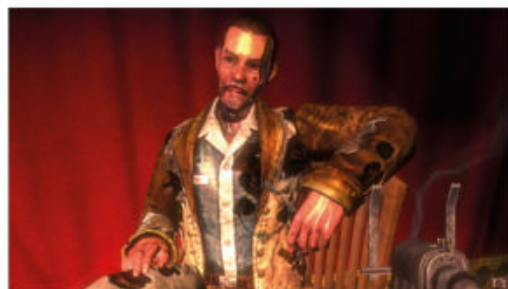
BIOSHOCK 2 2010

Development of the second game was handed to 2K Marin. People initially doubted that a sequel would work, but they absolutely nailed it.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE 2013

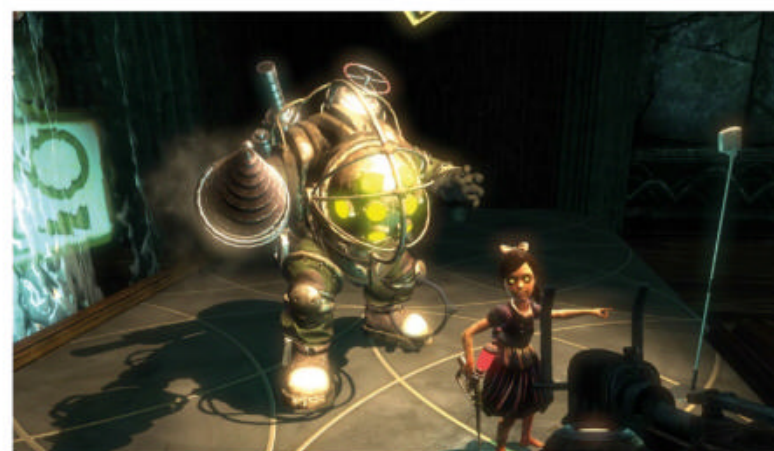
Ken Levine returned to *BioShock* for this sequel, set on the floating city of Columbia, which ignites fierce critical debate to this day.



ABOVE: Experiencing Rapture from a different perspective is fascinating.

RIGHT: Time to learn a bit more about the history of Rapture.

FAR RIGHT: Fighting Big Daddies is still commonplace in *BioShock 2*.



Ryan is dead, but his propaganda lives on.

game you're given the opportunity to kill or spare a character, and how these decisions play out can result in one of several different endings. If you have a callous attitude to life and death, Eleanor will notice, using you as her moral compass. But if you show compassion, she'll ultimately become a better person. This is so much more interesting than just saving or harvesting the Little Sisters in the first game, and has a higher emotional stakes for the protagonist. There are multiple endings – or rather, around six variations of the two main endings – and the outcomes of each can be drastically different based on the decisions you make and, by association, the influence you have on Eleanor.

LEVEL UP

BioShock 2's level design is also a step up from the first game. The overall themes of the districts aren't quite as striking – there's nothing here to rival Fort Frolic, for example – but the maps themselves are more complex, multi-layered, and spatially imaginative. In our first trip through Rapture we saw the lives of the rich and influential, but here we get a glimpse of what it's like to be down and out in Ryan's city. Pauper's Drop,

WE GET A GLIMPSE OF WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE DOWN AND OUT IN RYAN'S CITY

a rail maintenance facility turned slum, is the best example of this. The dense, detailed shanty town is bursting with little stories, showing an even uglier side to the city than we'd ever seen previously in the original *BioShock*.

We also get some flashes of life on the other side of the tracks, including the Adonis Luxury Resort, a spa for the wealthy and pampered. And the trip to Ryan Amusements – a propaganda theme park – is a clever way of giving Andrew Ryan and his philosophies a presence in the city, despite him being dead for many years.

While *BioShock 2's* improved combat, nuanced approach to morality, and more interesting level design makes it *functionally* a better game than *BioShock*, I do still think that the original is the superior *experience*. Descending into Rapture for the first time, learning about the city and its collapse, and the big reveal at the end are difficult to beat.



Returning to Rapture in *BioShock 2*, it still has impact as a setting, but that feeling of beguiling, wondrous mystery just isn't quite there. This at least makes sense in terms of the fiction. Subject Delta was created in the city and lived there for some years, which gives our familiarity with the setting as *BioShock* players some in-universe logic.

Thanks to the 2016 remastered re-release, *BioShock 2* runs perfectly on a modern gaming PC. That being said, you shouldn't expect much from the 'remaster' – it looks basically the same as it did when it was first released back in 2010. The main reason to play this version is improved compatibility with Windows 10, a 4K-friendly UI, and built-in support for modern gamepads. And you get both DLCs – *The Protector Trials* and the superb *Minerva's Den* – bundled in, making it a complete singleplayer package.

Sadly, the game's excellent, largely forgotten multiplayer mode is nowhere to be found in the re-release, and no longer possible to play in the original version. That's a real shame, but it's the singleplayer that really makes *BioShock 2* special, and it remains one of the best, and boldest, sequels ever made. ■

JAMES
DAVENPORT

I daydream about planning ever more efficient *Death Stranding* deliveries every day now. When I snap to, I've completed a different game. Here are some of them.

DIE TOGETHER



WE WERE THERE TOO

bit.ly/3dRJCOP

→ A good way to get to know someone is to watch them struggle. Here's a co-op puzzle game all about that. Two people, stuck in a castle. The only way out is to dictate the workings of odd contraptions to one another while lava quite often fills the room. Good, stressful fun.

GUN DOWN FEAR



DREAD X COLLECTION: THE HUNT

bit.ly/3xmogL

→ Seven small horror shooters in one package from some of the most exciting indie devs out there. Manually reload an old rifle while mad villagers run you down, talk to a leg, and use it to summon twisted and towering lumberjacks. The FPS has so much room to grow.

ROLL THE DICE

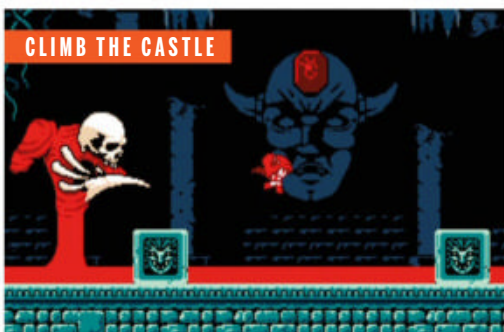


FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

beth.games/36hi3dz

→ It's been too long and I was too young and dumb the first time around. But yeah, all that big talk is true. *New Vegas* is the weirdest expression of 3D *Fallout* there is, a game that actually feels like a first-person CRPG. Get some mods and hit the strip.

CLIMB THE CASTLE



ASTALON: TEARS OF THE EARTH

bit.ly/3dQCT7J

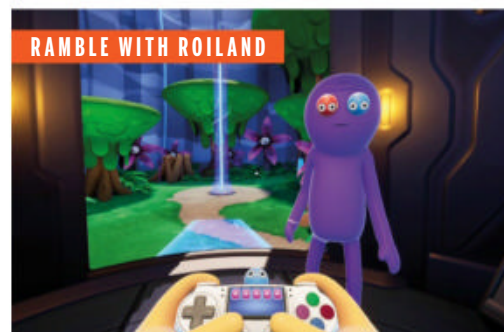
→ *Mega Man*, *Dark Souls*, and *Castlevania* walk into a bar. Then the bar is dropped into a trash compactor. *Astalon* emerges. A 2D action RPG with a grim story that transcends its toddler-shaped anime protagonists, and one of the best platformers I've played in a minute.

MUST
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by James Davenport

RAMBLE WITH ROILAND



TROVER SAVES THE UNIVERSE

bit.ly/36gf70e

→ I just like listening to Justin Roiland monologue, and this game is pretty much built around it. Ignore the prompts and you'll get to hear Roiland improvise monologues for weird alien characters, like Rick and Morty outtakes. Some fun VR gags in there too, if you have a headset.

DRIVE MAD

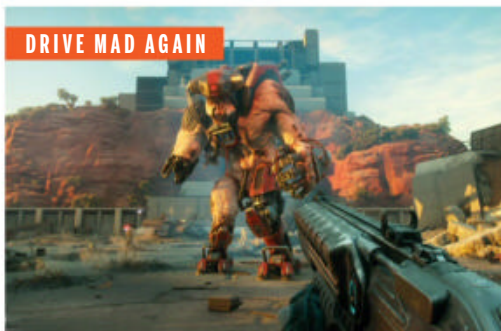


MAD MAX

bit.ly/3wnZChQ

→ More open worlds need to feel this empty and focused. There's a story, sure, but *Max Max* is all about making your cool car cool and also very deadly. You'll get sick of the outposts and simple hand-to-hand combat, but revving that V8? Sorry not sorry, you're back in.

DRIVE MAD AGAIN



RAGE 2

bit.ly/3ADvu5M

→ It's *Mad Max 2*. Avalanche Studios made another one, just with the *Rage* name plastered all over it. *Rage 2* trades the brutal quietude of the wasteland for 2008 Hot Topic energy, but you're still driving cool cars and killing dudes, just with wild guns and godly punches this time.

BUILD FAMILY



LEGO BUILDER'S JOURNEY

bit.ly/3d0IQSQ

→ Cute, gorgeous, and short. I grew up with Lego, so seeing them ray-traced and looking about as real as anything is an absolute treat. A simple puzzle premise grows and changes in surprising ways, all while telling a cute, silent story. Maybe the best Lego game?



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IT'S ALL OVER...

BLIND SPOTS?

The most popular games on PC... that aren't in our Top 100



DOTA 2

I'm afraid none of us play it. And if you don't all stop being so horrible, we never will. Besides, if we're all being honest with ourselves, *League of Legends* is just better, isn't it?



PLAYER UNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

It feels thematically appropriate to only let one battle royale game fight its way onto our Top 100 list, and *PUBG* needs to start hosting pop concerts if it's going to beat *Fortnite* there.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

In spot 100 last year, Valve's enduring shooter clung on for dear life this time round, but couldn't stand in the face of a barrage of new entries. Goodnight, old friend.



DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

We would get into this surprisingly successful multiplayer horror game, but frankly we can't afford the DLC on our games journalist salaries.



EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

It was at 62 last year, but this year got booted off in favour of *American Truck Simulator*. Clearly the US team is rubbing off on us a bit too much these days.



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VI

At 45 last year, now nowhere to be found. Have newer 4X and grand strategy games officially eaten Firaxis' lunch in 2021? Or did we just forget about it? A question for the ages.

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“THAT MEANS SOME BIG, EXCITING CHANGES TO OUR LIST”



ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Big numbers

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This month
Managed to conduct the Top 100 meetings without open bloodshed for one more fortunate year.

There are a few guiding principles that we stick to when we put together this Top 100 list. For example, we're always clear that this isn't a ranking of the greatest PC games of all time, but rather the best ones to play right now. It's a reflection of all the brilliant experiences the industry has to offer in 2021. Yes, that includes some retro classics that hold up nicely, but it also means

celebrating the impact of bold new releases.

But the most important principle is that it should reflect us as a team, and who we are as PC gamers. With lots of new additions to our crew since last year, that means some big, exciting changes to our list. Read on and enjoy!

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PC GAMER**

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PERSONAL PICK

*Rich
Stanton*



BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Six years old, and with a famously bad PC launch, but wow have the years been kind. The game looks stunning, plays amazingly well, and is packed with Bat-stuff. The most fun I've had with a singleplayer game this year, and the best superhero game ever made.

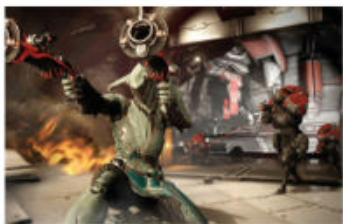
PERSONAL PICK

Rachel Watts



IF FOUND...

If Found remains one of the best visual novels on PC. Its story of a young queer woman is both painfully beautiful yet gut-wrenching, and the way you wipe away each panel revealing the next fits perfectly in a story about erasing the past to make room for a new beginning.



100 WARFRAME

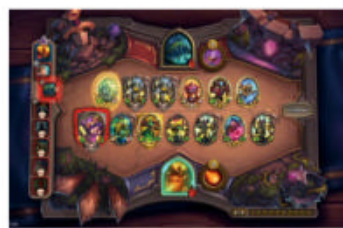
RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 68 ▼

Steven: *Warframe* has had some ups and downs over the last year, but it's still an innovative, strange, and absorbing MMO shooter unlike anything else on the PC. No other game comes close to doing what *Warframe* does – especially now that it has ship-to-ship space combat and a *Shadow of Mordor*-style Nemesis System. The amount of stuff to do in *Warframe* is mind-boggling. And with a major story expansion coming later this year, there's never been a better time to start playing.

99 HEARTHSTONE

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION No change

Tim: *Hearthstone* retains its place thanks to Battlegrounds mode, which has surely overtaken Standard as the main reason to play. Blizzard is pumping resources into BGs, and (inevitably) rolling out paid cosmetics to keep the accountants happy, but that feels reasonable given how good BGs is. Building a lobby-dominating comp is like creating your own Rube Goldberg machine and letting it run riot. Even in defeat, it feels moreish – a stark contrast to the despair of the ladder experience.



98

EVE ONLINE

RELEASED 2003 | LAST POSITION 71 ▼

Steven: The space MMO has slipped down the rankings largely because of a series of controversies involving economic rebalancing and microtransactions that players are not happy about. Since its release in 2003, *EVE Online* has struggled to invent systems that both enable its cataclysmically large battles while keeping a level playing field for both sides. This isn't the first time *EVE Online* has landed in hot water with its players, and it won't be the last, but what's consistent throughout is the game's ability to spark intergalactic drama in its crucible of player-driven war.

Right now, *EVE Online* is in the midst of its most destructive conflict yet as two

sides of the galaxy wage war on each other. Commanders have staged daring rescues, desperate last stands, and cunning ambushes. Meanwhile, the rest of the galaxy pulses and thrums to the rhythm of hundreds of smaller conflicts erupting every day. That sense of existing in a living, breathing ecosystem with other players is something no other MMO has, and your ability build a legacy in the ebb and flow of its player-driven empires is, to this day, remarkable. Even if *EVE*'s complicated controls and steep learning curve turn you away, you should still take every opportunity to read about each new (and bloody) chapter its players are writing.

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97

WINGSPAN

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Rachel: The most charming board game out there, and that includes both the physical and virtual versions. It's an engine-building card game where you play as bird enthusiasts trying to attract birds to your wildlife preserve. Each card has a bird fact and an illustration that has been wonderfully animated in the digital version. Definitely one to play with friends who like a laid-back approach to competitive card games.

Wes: Bird facts! *Wingspan's* theme really is delightful. Beneath that is just a great 'easy to learn, hard to master' strategy game, with tons of clever interplay between the different types of birds. My favourites are the predators, which can snatch other bird cards out of the deck for you to score points.

96 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION Re-entry

Jody: I didn't expect to recommend the cyberpunk RPG with elves, but here we are. *Dragonfall* may have a setting where dragons give up hoarding gold to become megacorp CEOs hoarding stock options, where a dwarf hacker mastercrafts software like a smith forging magic axes, but it understands the genre like few others (shout-out to *Umurangi Generation* and *The Red Strings Club*). It's explicitly anti-authoritarian, an entire game about holding together an anarcho-state in Berlin. With elves. It's the best revivalist CRPG too. While not pushing the subgenre as far as *Divinity: Original Sin 2* – it lifts a chunk of plot directly from *Baldur's Gate 2* – it modernises the isometric RPG with *Mass Effect*-style companions and *XCOM*-inspired combat.



95 SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 86 ▼

Fraser: *Desperados 3* is the newest tactics game from Mimimi Games, but 2016's *Shadow Tactics* remains my favourite thanks to the Edo setting and charismatic cast. It looks stunning, much more so than the Wild West, and by the end you won't want to say goodbye to your band of killer pals. And beyond that, it's still a superb, sneaky tactics game that encourages creativity, experimentation and, of course, save scumming. Bonus points for letting us use an adorable tanuki for murder.



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94

THE HOUSE IN FATA MORGANA

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION New

Sarah: I want to tell everyone to play this visual novel from Novectacle, which has spoiled any similar games I've played since. It's made up of intertwined stories spanning various characters and time periods and takes you, the protagonist, on an often traumatic journey as you attempt to rediscover your identity. The clean and vibrant art

style is pure screenshot fodder, while the soundtrack captures the mood within individual stories and scenes with haunting accuracy. The story gets darker and more intricate the further you progress, and depends on the decisions you make throughout. Fair warning though – the subject matter could be potentially triggering for some.



93 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION Re-entry

Jody: If you went through a 'slightly too into vampires' phase, *Bloodlines* is for you. An RPG made by people who played immersive sims, it turns you into a bloodsucker then lets you loose on the streets of LA. To survive you have to drink blood (in lush, spotlit scenes, the camera spinning round the act), and navigate vampire society (with characters so expressive they make more recent games seem stiff). Its vampires are vintage manipulators, as much a danger to each other as any hunter. You're given plenty of freedom in how you deal with them – and enough rope to make your own noose.

Phil: Given that the planned sequel doesn't seem to be happening, I guess we'll pop the original back in the list. Just make sure to download the fan-made patch first.



92 C&C REMASTERED COLLECTION

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 85 ▼

Phil: The original *Command & Conquer* and *Red Alert*, lovingly packaged up and remastered. What's truly remarkable about these games is that, over a quarter of a century since their original release, they're still a hell of a lot of fun to play. The pacey campaign missions challenge you to wipe out your enemy with often limited resources, making use of environmental features, special units and a wonderful tech tree. It's a concentrated blast of everything that makes the RTS great.



88 TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 11 ▼

Nat: *Titanfall 2* has seen better days. That singleplayer campaign is still an all-timer, but the game really shone in multiplayer – and sadly, *Titanfall 2*'s servers are getting wracked by the kinds of DDOS attacks that left the first game nothing but unplayable.

Morgan: It breaks my heart that *Titanfall 3* seems like a fantasy at this point.

87 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010
LAST POSITION No change

Robin: This underdog-turned-critical-darling understands what *Fallout* should be in a way I don't think Bethesda ever has. A rich role-playing adventure with an intricate web of choices that holds up well, even if its visuals don't.

Chris: It's so deep that no matter how many times you've played, there are still new choices to make.

86 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 26 ▼

Rachel: It may have fallen a fair way down in our top 100, but *Edith Finch* is still a powerhouse of storytelling as you explore Edith's childhood home to discover how each of her relatives met their end. It's an incredibly elegant game, that lets you into the headspace of each person at a particular moment in their lives. A gorgeous and bittersweet experience.



91

MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Jody: The three good space opera RPGs jammed together, with fewer bugs, more DLC. What kind of space captain do you want to be? Your version of Commander Shepard is free to be a diplomat giving inspiring speeches, a badass punching first and shooting later, or a dreamboat smooching blue aliens.

The first game starts strongly, introducing a galaxy built on familiar sci-fi ideas, but with weird aliens too. It finishes strongly as well, a run of missions building to a the defeat of an impossibly powerful invader. In the middle there's some padding where you drive across identikit planets, which is a shame. And the less

said about the third game's ending, the better. *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* is mostly in this list for *Mass Effect 2*, the Goldilocks centrepiece that set plot aside to focus on character. *Mass Effect 2* has you put together a crew of 12 who, like the universe, build on familiar clichés taken to surprising places. Across missions that jump from undercover infiltration to action setpiece to mystery thriller you get to know your Dirty Dozen, and in choosing how you respond to their dilemmas, build a hero to lead them. By the end you feel so much ownership of your Shepard, you'll get confused by screenshots because the wrong character is in them.



90 OPUS MAGNUM

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 49 ▼

Phil: A puzzle game about beautiful machines. You're tasked with creating alchemical compounds, using pistons and rotators to manipulate atoms into their desired form. But as much as the story has fun with the conceit, the real satisfaction of *Opus Magnum* comes from the process of engineering a solution. There is no one way to solve any of the problems, so every machine is inherently your own design. Your attempt may be inefficient, even inelegant, but you'll love it all the same.

89 SEA OF THIEVES

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 78 ▼

Mollie: I think I may be one of the last remaining *Sea of Thieves* likers on our team, and that's mostly because I'm a massive gremlin in the game. In no other situation would it be socially acceptable for me to get absolutely trolled, vomit into a bucket and then douse my friends with my chunky goodness. Sailing the seas and plundering booty is fun and all, but drunkenly playing the concertina is the real reason I love this game so much.



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85

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION 43 ▼

Sarah: I'll always love *World of Warcraft* but I've struggled with motivation to log in since the launch of *Shadowlands*. We went from being ridiculously overpowered in BFA to power systems that feel like they were tacked on as an afterthought. I'm still there and still raiding, but even that feels more like a chore the further into the expansion we go.

Steven: *World of Warcraft* is still such an influential game, but yeah, it feels like it's in the midst of a serious identity crisis. If you've never played it, it's still an enormous and enjoyable experience, but my god is *Shadowlands* starting to feel like a big disappointment. At least *WoW Classic* is trucking along just fine (assuming you're not into PvP).



84 SUPER MEGA BASEBALL 3

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 34 ▼

Chris: The *Super Mega Baseball* series has always been a fun and cartoony on-field baseball game, but *SMB3* added tons of depth when it comes to making your randomly generated players memorable. Their skills can be enhanced during a season or fade over time as they grow, age, and eventually retire. The player system gives your team a feeling of continuity over multiple seasons, and *SMB3* continues to take away the sting of *MLB: The Show* not being on PC.

83 ALIEN: ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION 27 ▼

Andy K: In the seven years since *Isolation* was released, I haven't encountered a single game with an enemy as terrifyingly intelligent as its xenomorph. It's wild no one tried to top it. Maybe they just couldn't. Creative Assembly created something really special here: a big-budget game based on a major Hollywood property that is intelligent, subversive, and systematically interesting. It's a great stealth game, a genre-defining horror experience, and the stylish retro-future aesthetic makes it still one of the prettiest games on PC. In terms of design, art, audio, and atmosphere, it's a masterpiece. The story has some great moments – particularly the heartfelt message from Ellen Ripley to her daughter, which Sigourney Weaver plays beautifully. There will never be a better *Alien* game.





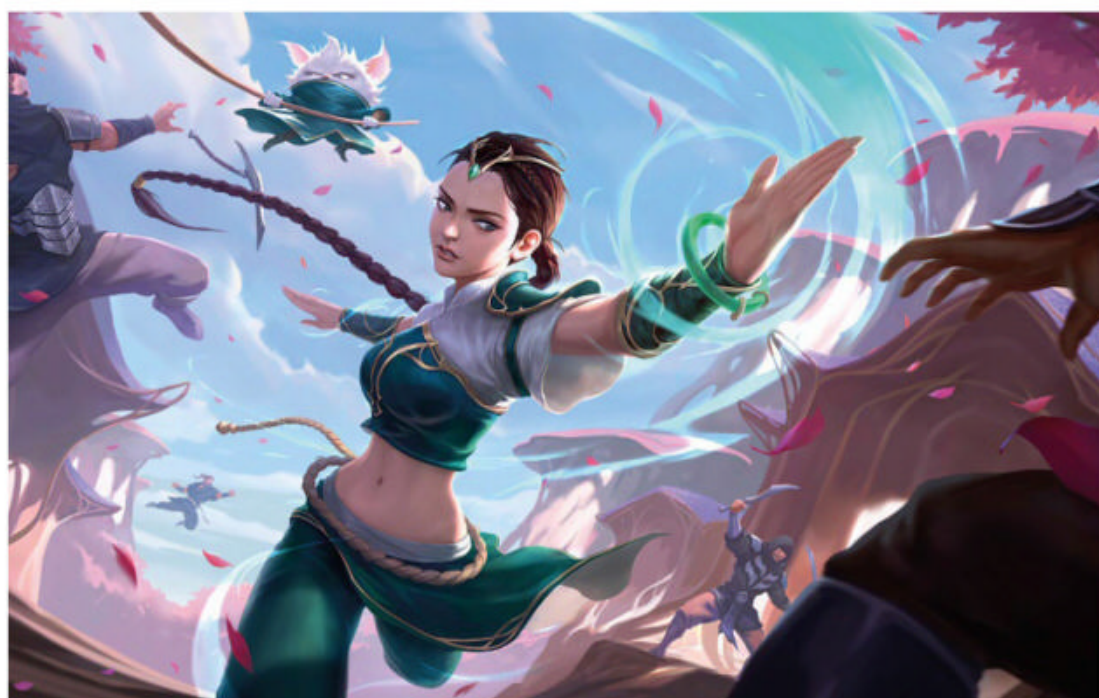
PERSONAL PICK

Nat Clayton



UNBEATABLE: WHITE LABEL

Calling it now: arcade rhythm adventure *Unbeatable* is going to be the coolest game of whatever year it launches in. This year's *White Label* is a strong demo for its high-paced beats, framed by snapshots of a world oozing with sun-bleached, anime-tinted melancholy.



82

LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 84 ▲

Robin: It speaks to my love for Riot's online CCG that I keep talking about it even though it makes *Hearthstone*-loving Tim Clark want to fire me. It's gone from strength to strength this year, introducing exciting new cards and a brilliant solo mode, while continuing to stick to its remarkably generous take on a free-to-play business model, which still lets you easily craft the decks you want without paying a penny. It has had some wobbles recently – including a chaotic meta and some controversial cosmetics – but refreshing transparency and bold action from the dev team gives confidence that they're listening. In some ways it does

still feel like a game that's growing and finding its feet – but considering it's already so good, that potential is nothing but hugely exciting.

Steven: Frankly, I'm shocked that it's 2021 and one of my favourite games is a card game. You'd think after so many games there'd be no room for a new one to swoop in and innovate, but *Legends of Runeterra* continues to be brilliant. Robin talks a lot about its new stuff, but part of what keeps me coming back is just how wonderful the foundation it is built upon is. It's just a shame that it seems like *Runeterra*'s curse is that it will continue to be criminally overlooked by so many players.

PERSONAL PICK

Sarah James



FINAL FANTASY 13

I know, I know. I wasn't keen on it at first either. But I stuck with it and it's become one of the *FF* games I'll find myself replaying every couple of years. The story is great, Lightning is badass, and while the combat isn't my favourite – hello *FF12* – it's still fun to play around with.



81 SUNLESS SKIES

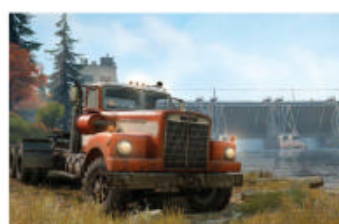
RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 82 ▲

Fraser: Spaceships? Passé. Space trains? Now we're talking. *Sunless Skies* makes you brave the dangers of the void while inside a loco full of troubled crewmates, usually starving and being driven round the bend. Part trading sim, RPG and exploration romp, it's all weird, and elevated by the best videogame writing around. The far-ranging *Sovereign Edition* update introduces a raft of improvements, throwing new characters, trains and stories into the already dense mix.

80 SNOWRUNNER

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Morgan: *Snowrunner* is the mud trucking sim of my dreams. It's *Death Stranding* without all the drama and ghost babies: Just you, your truck, and the stack of pipes that need to get to the top of this mountain. *Snowrunner* is no tranquil driving sim. Every job is a battle against nature itself and your weapons are wheels, winches, and willpower. In the year since launch, *Snowrunner* has only gotten bigger and better with quality DLC and a vibrant modding community.



79 VALORANT

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 94 ▲

Evan: Replicating the weapons, map philosophy, and beautiful rhythm of *Counter-Strike* is some scientific accomplishment. *Valorant* is its own game, though, with meaningful technical advancements (it'll give you 90 fps on a graphing calculator) and magical character abilities that let you and your opponent compete for precious positioning.

78 HOMEWORLD REMASTERED COLLECTION

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 85 ▲

Nat: *Homeworld's* tragic space opera is timeless, but its original release is a little less so. Thankfully, the *Remastered Collection* is still a fantastic way to experience a truly singular spacefaring RTS – one that has attracted a healthy modding scene that means you can recreate fleet battles from *Star Trek* to *Mass Effect*.

77 WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE II

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 74 ▼

Robin: The leading light of *Left 4 Dead's* many imitators, trading guns and zombies for rich melee combat and a wonderfully well-realised take on the horror and humour of the Warhammer Fantasy setting. The new (free) *Chaos Wastes* expansion is a treat, too – a wild, co-op roguelike mode that's full of surprises.



76 CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 59 ▼

Steven: A near-perfect middle ground between the daunting complexity of classic roguelikes and the mind-boggling *Dwarf Fortress*. It's also the weirdest RPG I've ever played. Sentient beanstalks, tinker bears, space-time paradoxes, fungal infections – it's almost impossible to describe. Each new game, an entire world (with its own cultures and history) is generated, and you can play as anything from a desert nomad to a cybernetically enhanced half-man-half-tank. Just play it.

75 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 60 ▼

Harry: A decade on, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* slips down the Top 100 again this year, and *The Forgotten City*, based on a *Skyrim* mod, has just come out, providing competition for next year's list.

Jody: In my current playthrough I have my own museum, a chainsword, and fabulous hair. The Special Edition means *Skyrim* handles ridiculous mod loads without instability. It's better than ever. I'll be tired of *Skyrim* when I'm tired of life.



74 TEKKEN 7

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION New

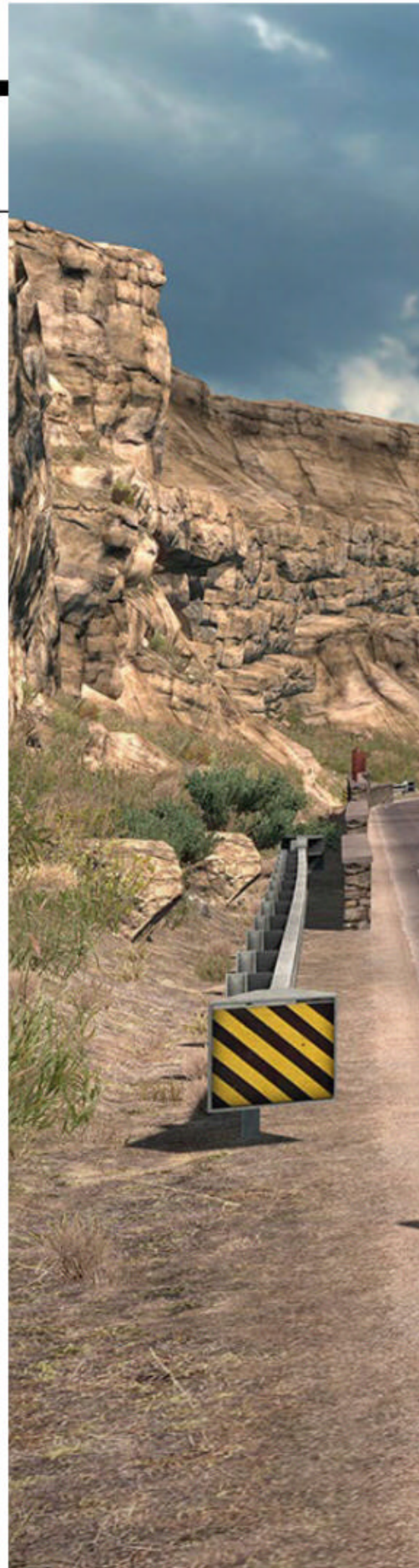
Mollie: I've played my fair share of fighting games over the years, but few have kept me coming back in the way *Tekken 7* does. Every hit, block and sidestep feel so intensely satisfying to me. Couple that with a banging soundtrack, cinematic ultimate moves and a heart-pounding dramatic slow-mo cam, and every match feels like a full-blown theatrical performance.

Though I still lament the lack of Christie Monteiro in the game, the roster is solid. Lucky Chloe has quickly become a series favourite for me, and wild DLC characters like *The Walking Dead's* Negan and *Final Fantasy 15's* Noctis just

work somehow. *Tekken 7* is easily the best 3D fighter out there right now, and my favourite fighting game in recent memory.

Graeme: *Tekken 7* is an easy fighting game Hall of Fame contender, but it's also a love letter to long-term fans, tying-up the soap opera in perfect melodramatic fashion. As we're introduced to Kazumi Mishima, wife to Hahatchi, she instructs Akuma from *Street Fighter* (yeah) to kill her husband if she fails to do it herself. Also Yoshimitsu is an alien, I guess?

The bombastic combat is what makes *Tekken* so addictive, but it's the series' unflinching commitment to lore and personalities that makes me love it.



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73

AMERICAN TRUCK SIMULATOR

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION New

James: Pool Noodle, this is Ham Hock – we've got *American Truck Simulator* coming up on the left, taking point. *Euro Truck Sim* can take a breather. This son of a gun's packing Texas and Idaho, on the way to pick up Wyoming. Kanye West lives in Wyoming. A recent multiplayer update means you can drive by Kanye's yard with a friend. Nothing eases the weight of a heavy load, on the truck and the soul, like a convoy. Over.

Andy K: I love driving through the desert at night, but my heart belongs to *Euro Truck Simulator 2*. The larger map has a lot more variety, from the mountains of Norway to the vineyards of France, making for more exciting road trips.



72 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 32 ▼

Fraser: *Cities: Skylines* continues its reign, with few new urban city builders appearing to steal its crown. It remains undefeated in part because of the dearth of competition, but the many DLC additions and huge list of mods have ensured that even after five years it still has plenty to offer would-be mayors. There's even an expansion exclusively dedicated to parks. And it turns out that flooding cities with poo doesn't get old. Sorry, citizens!

Phil: The city-building genre has had something of a resurgence thanks to games like *Frostpunk* and *Anno 1800* offering up their very different takes on the basic formula. But if you want the best game to actually build a city in, then here it is.



71 METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 43 ▼

Wes: A dramatic departure from previous *Metal Gears*, which is what I love about it. After the on-rails nonsense of the intro, it pretty much sets you free to be the ultimate spy in an amazing sandbox.

Rich: Simply one of the best games ever made, a unique take on open-world design, and rammed with things to do. This feels like the game *Metal Gear Solid* was always building towards: ignore any nonsense about it being unfinished, and enjoy Kojima Productions' finest ever game.

PERSONAL PICK

Mollie Taylor



PERSONA 5 STRIKERS

Yes, it's weird that this is on PC before *Persona 5*. But *Strikers* is fantastic, and the only *Warriors*-style game I've ever managed to stomach. It manages to retain most of *Persona 5*'s original charm and jazzy style, feeling like a fun summer reunion with your old school pals.

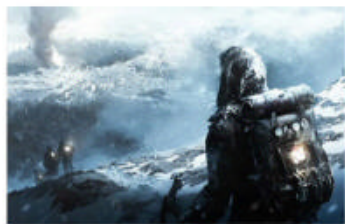
PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti



RISING STORM 2: VIETNAM

An underrated FPS that draws on obscure skills: your knack for the perfect artillery spot; your willingness to die. The asymmetries between the Vietnamese factions (North and South) and US forces create memorably scrappy firefights. A messier and better *Battlefield*.



70 FROSTPUNK

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 64 ▼

Fraser: Few management games have made me feel like such a monster, but that's what happens when you become a fascist to save a few lives and they freeze to death anyway. The cold and desperation makes you cold and desperate. *Frostpunk* is a challenging apocalyptic city builder with plenty of engaging systems, but it's the high stakes and brutal consequences of your decisions that makes it special. And thanks to the DLC, you can also see what life was like just before the big freeze.

69 ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 44 ▼

Evan: Is *Arma* a tedious and complicated sim, or a peerless sandbox-playground for military antics? Years into its lifespan, the contradiction is potent: introducing a new player means handing them a list of mods they 'absolutely' need, and a longer list of unusual keybinds. But at the end of that not-so-basic training awaits a serious and often silly game about riding in a helicopter with a dozen of your closest Discord friends, one of whom then crashes that helicopter into a tree.



68 TEARDOWN

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Nat: Remember the first time you took a sledgehammer to a house in *Red Faction Guerrilla*? *Teardown* is that, but pushed to its best extreme. A destruction sandbox where breakable buildings aren't a backdrop to gunfights, but instead used to prop up an incredible set of heist puzzles.

Teardown may be voxelated, but everything breaks as you'd expect. Wood buckles. Plaster cracks to reveal underlying brickwork. Fire spreads as smoke billows through hallways, and a remarkably efficient approach to ray-tracing makes sure it all looks perfectly tactile.

In most levels, you're free to explore and destroy the map as you see fit. You'll

have a set number of items to rob (briefcases, safes, cars), and once you snag one, the timer starts. Carve an optimal route through the map, grab the goods, and make it out before the cops arrive. Simple, but nerve-wracking.

Beyond that, though, *Teardown*'s exploding mod scene has turned the voxel playground into a brand new *Garry's Mod*. There's a workshop packed to the brim with new maps to smash up, and a wealth of toys ranging from *GMod*-style physics guns to miniguns akimbo.

Teardown's puzzles are decent fun, but I'll be smashing my way through fan-made maps for a long time yet.



67

UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 57

Fraser: Wadjet Eye's best adventure game also borrows a lot from great RPGs. *Unavowed* throws you into an ancient society of magical problem-solvers after a possession ruined your life. It's got big party-based RPG vibes,

complete with special origin stories and a branching plot that goes to some surprising places.

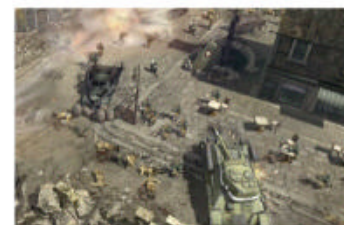
But this is still firmly a 2D point-and-click, where most of your time will be spent solving mysteries. And what excellent mysteries they are, forcing you to use both magic and your investigative chops to solve. What lingers, though, are the charming characters and *Unavowed's* vision of New York – a place simultaneously familiar and utterly alien.



66 FOOTBALL MANAGER 2021

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Dave: We finally made it, ma! *Football Manager* is in the PC Gamer top 100, rightfully taking a place in the pantheon of PC greatness. As the finest long-term RPG on any platform, I'd argue it's a bit too far down the list, but there are still many who foolishly see it as some sort of glorified spreadsheet. Football (of the less well armoured soccer variety) is obviously central to the game, which does put people off. But *FM* is a mix of a sporting version of *The Sims*, marshalling and developing your little computer people to kick a ball about better than other little computer people, and a heart-wrenching RPG about success, failure, heroism, the fragility of youth, lost potential, and the inevitable decay of our own corporeal forms.



65 COMPANY OF HEROES 2

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: Finally! I've been trying to get *CoH2* in here for years. This RTS is perhaps a controversial choice, and is certainly more divisive than its predecessor, but the first game has had its time on this list. There are plenty of reasons to recommend the sequel, especially if you're tired of the Western Front, such as the fantastic *Ardennes Assault* expansion, which features a dynamic turn-based campaign – something Relic is taking even further in the upcoming *Company of Heroes 3*.

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FORZA HORIZON 4

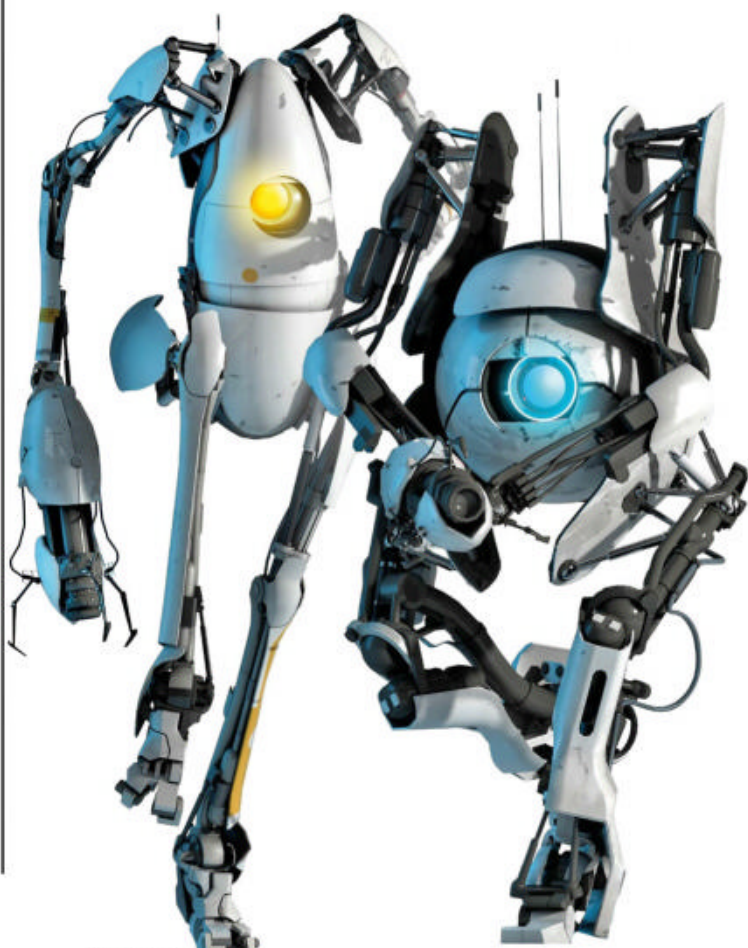
RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 36 ▼

James: The game that helped me understand why James Spader makes love to his car in *Crash*. Cars are cool and hot and *Horizon 4* knows it. Play it as a racing simulation or turn on all the assists and play it like *Lego*. Or just deck out a van with a *Dragonball Z* livery and

drive it off cliff edges, capturing the poetic footage as it tumbles.

Nat: *Forza* lets me tear down my own backyard in the big daft *Halo* jeep, which makes it the best racing game ever.

Rich: I just love that you can have a race in Transit vans.



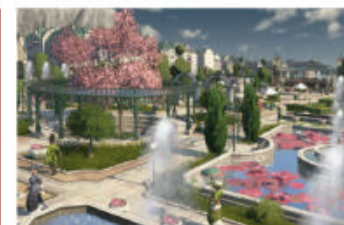
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PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 47 ▼

James: A game that bends the rules of space also exists outside of time. *Portal 2* is one of the funniest games ever made. Even if the portal puzzles get easier to parse with every run, I'm always finding new routes and accidentally developing speedrun strats, buoyed by good humour, great performances, and excellent tunes throughout. If you've yet to play the co-op campaign, do it now. Spec out incredibly complex solutions to simple problems, together.

Harry: If you like jokes, games, and puzzles, *Portal 2* is essential. It's not a looker by today's standards, of course, but it doesn't need to be. Cleverness, invention, and laughs win over graphics any day. Plus, it'll probably run very nicely on your Steam Deck.



62

ANNO 1800

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION New

Phil: Ubisoft's trade-focused city-builder has grown into something remarkable. Over a handful of DLC seasons it's doubled down on the satisfaction of seeing a territory grow by adding a handful of new regions with specific quirks. In Africa, you'll create canal systems to irrigate the land. In the Arctic, you'll build airships to circumnavigate imposing glaciers. And back in Europe, you'll expand your docks into a global hub supporting your ever-expanding empire.



61 SESSION

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 55 ▼

Nat: Tony Hawk might've introduced me to skateboarding, but *Session* understands why I've come to love it. There are no time limits and no high scores: just you, your board, and an urban sandbox to destroy.

Session manages to make the simple act of rolling around on your skateboard feel incredible. Controls can be tweaked to be as easy or tough as possible, and rare that a game can make the humble ollie feel satisfying. Challenges that'd be trivial in *THPS* become hour-long battles to nail a nollie heelflip into a lipslide off the sidewalk.

Admittedly, *Session* is still extremely work-in-progress. Character models are a bit janky, animations bug out, and the

physics are often hilariously broken. But each new update brings a new way to express your skating style, whether it's the introduction of freestyle primo and casper tricks, or a new city block featuring iconic skate spots.

James: Normally, I'd hold back on recommending an Early Access game, but *Session's* impressive growth and momentum easily make up for the jank. It's already had a total physics overhaul, and an animation refresh is on the way. New trick systems and levels show up every couple of months, and with publisher Nacon on board, we might see *Session* pick up even more speed on the way to 1.0.

58 CHIVALRY 2

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: A game that lets you chop off someone's limbs, pick them up, and then use them to beat someone else to death – all while you're screaming, they're screaming, everyone just won't stop screaming. They're really screams of joy, though, because this multiplayer medieval combat romp is just so much damn fun.

57 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 50 ▼

Wes: The online heists are still some of the most intricate co-op gaming you can do today. Rockstar's online infrastructure is terrible, though.

Morgan: Yep, finally completing *GTA Online's* big Doomsday heist will go down in the history books of my friend group. Unfortunately, so will all the hackers and griefers who tried to ruin our fun.

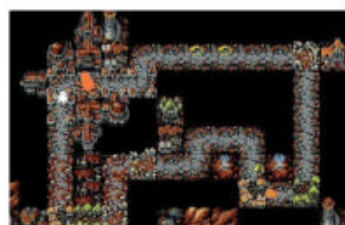
56 GENSHIN IMPACT

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Steven: Since its launch, Genshin Impact has grown in a way no MMO ever could. Player housing, new territories, and a bunch of new characters – it's crazy how good this free game is.

Morgan: Technically free. Its gacha money-making tactics were overbearing enough to turn me off.

Steven: You only have to spend the money if you want to.



60 LOOP HERO

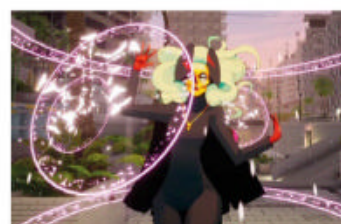
RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Harry: Don't be put off by the aesthetic, this is one of the most accessible games I've played in 2021. It's nostalgic style belies an absorbing adventure that's wonderfully simple to start, but brutal to master. You decide the difficulty of your knight's journey by adding monster tiles for more gear and resources, or helpful boons, colouring in the blackness with often surprising results. Take your resources or try for one more loop? For much of 2021 I've struggled to choose.

59 PARADISE KILLER

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Morgan: Paradise Killer takes the most classically compelling premise in literary history (there's been a murder, you have to solve it) and places it in one of the strangest, most interesting videogame worlds I've ever explored. Piecing together timelines and motives while interrogating characters named Doctor Doom Jazz or Lydia Day Break never gets old. It's a visual novel for people that don't think they'd be into visual novels. A true sleeper hit.



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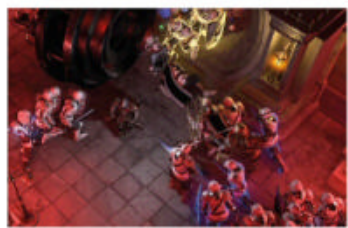
PREY

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 56

James: I bounced off *Prey* a couple of times, but once I accepted that you're always on the back foot it clicked. This is *Resident Evil* in space, but you choose what kind of key you want to unlock the next door with: hacking, secret vent

pathways, or turning into a banana and sliding through a hole in the wall.

Jody: The space station being a contiguous space you explore inside and out so thoroughly makes *Prey* the *System Shock 3* of my dreams. You can hop into space to find alternate routes. You can find every single member of the crew, even finding the character sheets of the D&D group on board and then a recording of their game. There's so much detail.



54 PATH OF EXILE

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 51

Fraser: This is the only action-RPG I think about. For years the game has been evolving and spitting out experiments, beckoning me back time and time again to slaughter hordes of monsters and obsess over loot and builds. The main progression system is the pinnacle of ARPG character building, and one that's kept me tinkering away for the better part of a decade. I suspect only the in-development sequel will be able to tear me away.

53 SEKIRO

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 6

Wes: I don't want to start a debate about game difficulty, but overcoming *Sekiro's* challenge was a thrill I haven't gotten from an action game since *God Hand*. It demands you play on its terms. Without the flexibility of *Dark Souls'* RPG systems, you simply have to master the blade. The moment you parry a boss's final hit and counter with a deathblow you'll realise you've felt dead inside for years.

James: I prefer From's RPGs, but nothing's gonna best *Sekiro's* take on sword combat for a long time.

Morgan: Come on James, *Chivalry 2* is right over there. *Sekiro* is hands-down my favourite From game yet. By reining in its combat options and focusing on a single weapon, it ended up with combat so good that *Star Wars* copied it.





PERSONAL PICK

James Davenport



THE EVIL WITHIN 2

The *Evil Within 2* takes horror into huge open spaces and still pulls off a ton of memorable scares. That shed in the distance might just be a fixture in your playthrough, but in mine? Anima harassed me the rest of the game, hair to the floor with that horrible shriek.



52

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: Yes, it's more *Assassin's Creed*, with a vast open world filled with stuff to climb, people to murder and crap to collect. While much is unchanged, I still found myself spending something like 150 hours playing. As a Scot I hate to say it, but England is a pretty nice place to explore. It's jam-packed with some of the series' most charismatic denizens, not least of which is Eivor, a terse but charming protagonist whose growls and sighs speak volumes. She's my favourite assassin, even over the superb Kassandra.

Sarah: I absolutely adored Eivor, and her horse (who I named Horace). We both spent far too much time exploring England

to compare places I've visited with their in-game counterparts. I'm still slightly jealous that Andy K came up with the Jorvik/York comparison article before I'd thought of it.

Steven: I'm such a big fan of this new direction *Assassin's Creed* has taken – even if it sometimes still feels a little too big for its own good. Shifting to become an RPG with a branching narrative is just such a fun way to intimately explore a romanticised version of different historical periods, and *Valhalla* makes some really strong improvements in the narrative department, especially in the complex relationship between Eivor and her brother.

PERSONAL PICK

Andy Kelly



L.A. NOIRE

An anthology of compelling detective stories, set in a lavish, painstakingly researched 1940s Los Angeles. The face capture tech, along with a cast of genuinely great actors (including familiar faces from *Mad Men*), gives *L.A. Noire* a prestige TV feel, and it's a world I love losing myself in.



51 BLACK MESA

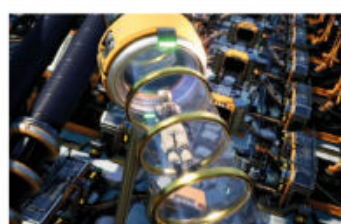
RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 63 ▲

Nat: For a long time, *Black Mesa* was a joke. An over-ambitious attempt to completely remake *Half-Life* from the ground up as a standalone mod. But lo and behold, it's finally finished – and bloody hell, if it isn't a stunning thing. The game deftly reimagines Valve's 1998 debut, trimming the more tedious parts while remaking *Xen* from the ground up. I wouldn't say it replaces the seminal shooter outright, but it's a damn fine way to experience it from a brand new angle.

50 SATISFACTORY

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION New

Wes: A factory building game so perfectly named I defy anyone to talk about it without using the word 'satisfying'. It can't be done! My first factory was a mess of conveyor belts on a forest floor, ugly and inefficient, so I tore it down and rebuilt. And again. And again. My multiplayer crew is now building towering skyscraper factories linked by automated sky trains. Some people lose a year building castles in *Minecraft*, I lost one building iron rods in *Satisfactory*, and I don't regret a second.



49 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 40 ▼

Phil: Build rockets and send them into space. Or, just as likely, fail because of a disastrous flaw with your design. *Kerbal Space Program* takes all the complicated maths needed to successfully hurl functional machines out of a planet's atmosphere and presents them in a way that celebrates creativity, expression and fun. There's still nothing quite like it.

48 SPELUNKY 2

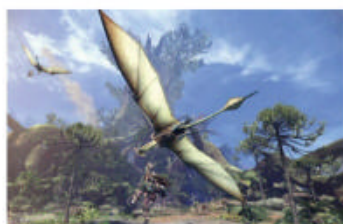
RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Evan: Depth, literally and figuratively. Creator Derek Yu calls it "spiky," a label that describes many of the things you can impale yourself upon as well as the emotional highs and lows its teeming, subterranean universe produces. A great spectator game, *Spelunky 2*'s streaming and YouTube community is full of experimentation and unbelievable feats.

47 THE JACKBOX PARTY PACK 7

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Robin: I don't think there exists a better digital icebreaker than a good round of *Jackbox*. It's brilliantly accessible – anyone who can work a smartphone can join in – and adapts wonderfully to the sense of humour of whatever group you've assembled. Family gatherings, drunken parties, or lunchtime in the office – it does it all.



46 MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 35 ▼

Rich: A triumphant reimagining of Capcom's excellent series that looks gorgeous and delivers some of the best co-op you'll ever see. Incredible combat with huge depth, spectacular monsters and environments, and there's so much of it. You never want this game to end.

Wes: The 2020 expansion *Iceborne* adds an endgame zone you can spend months in and a vastly streamlined gathering hub for multiplayer. It's everything I didn't know I needed in the base game.

45 HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 20 ▼

Chris: One of the few blockbuster games built from the ground up for VR, and certainly the best and most beautiful. Whatever Valve did under the hood with the game's locomotion, it's easily the most comfortable VR game, one that I could play for hours at a time without feeling the nausea or headaches VR usually gives me after about 40 minutes. Plus, it cleverly rewrote some Half-Life lore that's been in the books for a decade, priming us for whatever comes next.



44 DEVOTION

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION New

Rachel: First released back in February 2019, *Devotion* was available on Steam for only six days before it was hit with an infamous review-bombing. Determined to re-release the game, Red Candle put it back up for sale this year.

Sharing many similarities to Konami's claustrophobic house in *P.T.*, *Devotion* is a story about a family living in a small 1980s apartment in Taiwan, each member having their own personal demons dragged out into the house's stark fluorescent lighting. Everything kicks off after the daughter contracts a mysterious illness, which causes the desperate father to tumble into a spiral of paranoia and misplaced

spiritualism. What's great about *Devotion* is that there are no literal monsters, the game is more interested in how the troubled headspaces of a family can seep into the physical space of a home. It's not often we get to see the exploration of a person's religious faith, and seeing how Red Candle has used that to create an insidious story of family tragedy is like no other horror game I've played. It's a horror tale that actually cares about its characters, and together with artful sequences and spine-chilling moments, it's truly one of the best horror stories of all time. A game that was well worth the wait.

43

RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

James: So much more than the tall vampire woman. I mean, Lady Dimitrescu certainly makes a lasting impression, but she's just one chapter of this excellent cosmic horror anthology.

Moving from a frozen village overrun with lycans, through a classic game of cat and mouse in a lavish castle, and later arriving at colour-drained industrial body horror – something like *Hellraiser* meets *Saw* – *Village* goes from goofy action to the scariest setpieces in the series' history. Along the way, it embraces everything I identify with *Resident Evil*: locked doors, ridiculous keys and goofy characters. This is *Resident Evil* at its most self aware, at its scariest, and its most surprising.



42 THE SIMS 4

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION 18 ▼

Mollie: I have a lot of love for *The Sims 4*. It had a rocky launch and issues that still persist years later, but it's the first game I boot up whenever I get that creative itch. The build mode is genuinely fantastic, and I feel like Maxis is finally getting the hang of making consistently excellent expansion packs. The gameplay is still a little vapid compared to earlier entries, but it's a hell of a lot better than it used to be. The biggest bummer, and the reason for its steep drop this year, is how high the financial barrier to entry has become. The base game is painfully barren, with simple additions like seasons and pets essentially locked behind paywalls. You could buy a lot of games in the Top 100 for the same price as a complete *Sims 4* collection, and that makes it harder to recommend.



41 HADES

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 79 ▲

Jorge: A gorgeous and stylish hack-and-slash roguelike featuring some of the best writing, voice acting, and music around. As Zagreus, the Prince of the Underworld, you try to escape to the land of the living to meet your mother. Meanwhile, your father, Hades, is doing everything in his power to keep you from her. Playing *Hades*, you'll tell yourself, "OK, this is the last run, then I'm going to bed," but before you know it, you're up at 4am for the third night in a row.

PERSONAL PICK

Chris
Livingston



WEST OF LOATHING

Truly funny games are rare, and in *WoL* everything from the dialogue to the item descriptions are brilliantly witty, so much so you'll spend extra time playing just to make sure you've found every last bit of text. And despite the stick figure art, it's a true, open-world Western! Yeehaw!

PERSONAL PICK

Morgan
Park



KNOCKOUT CITY

If you told me months ago that EA would put out a dodgeball game that'd consume my life for a month, I'd laugh. Still, *Knockout City* really is that good. Its unique combat system looks like a kid-friendly shooter at first, but it's all about timing, fakeouts, and coordination.



40 BATTLETECH

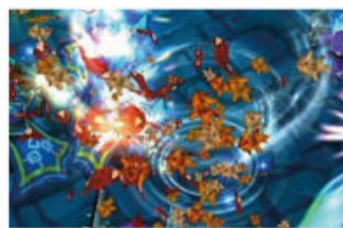
RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 29 ▼

Fraser: One of my favourite tactics games of all time, *BattleTech* is an exciting romp through a galaxy full of intrigue, ambitious nobles and giant mechs. There's a good campaign tying all the fights together, but brawling with steel monstrosities is what keeps the grin on my face. You can build your mech dream team – axe-wielding behemoths with jetpacks, gargantuan mobile weapon platforms, precious wee scouts – and then fling them into tricky battles. To the victor goes the scrap.

39 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION 28 ▼

Steven: *Dota 2* players will crucify me for it, but *League of Legends* is the only MOBA you should play in 2020. It's just so much more accessible, without sacrificing any of the crazy high-level teamplay, and its emphasis on skilful solo play makes for ridiculously exciting moments when a single player can swing the game in their favour. It's also fun being a part of a cinematic universe, with *Legends of Runeterra* and *Teamfight Tactics*.



38 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

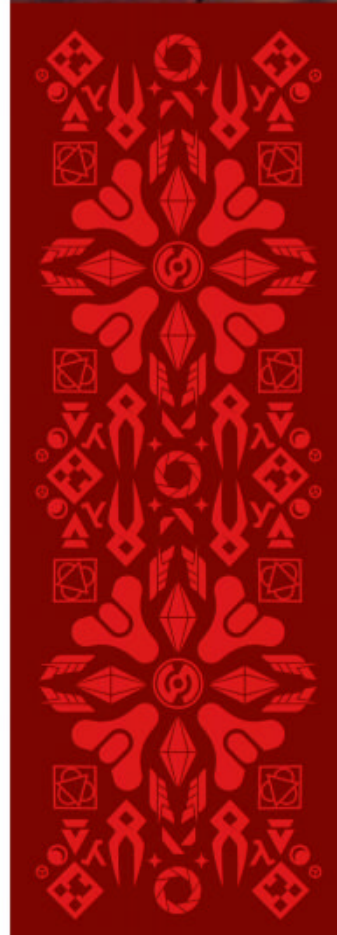
RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION No change

Rich: I still play *Counter-Strike* on a weekly basis and, even when the likes of *Siege* or *Valorant* have tempted me away for a time, I always come back. The competition is full of gadgets and powers and classes, but *CS:GO*'s absolute purity and dedication to a core that works so well remains irresistible. And while I've heard some awful stuff on team chat, I've also made a lot of good buddies over the years: when you have a little 'crew' that's on regularly, this game goes to another level.

Evan: It's the most popular FPS in the world, an almost decade-old giant that

stands on the shoulders of arguably the most successful mod of all time (sorry, *DOTA*). It's one of my most-played games ever. But in 2021, it's aging. Is it really the shooter I'd recommend to someone first right now? No way. Recent experiments like adding a battle royale mode have only revealed the greying tech it sits upon.

Nat: I'm not a *CS:GO* player. But as a veteran Source mapper, I have endless respect for the way it's kept the torch of community map-making lit all these years. Source may be dated, but *Counter-Strike*'s mappers are doing incredible things with it.



T100P
2021

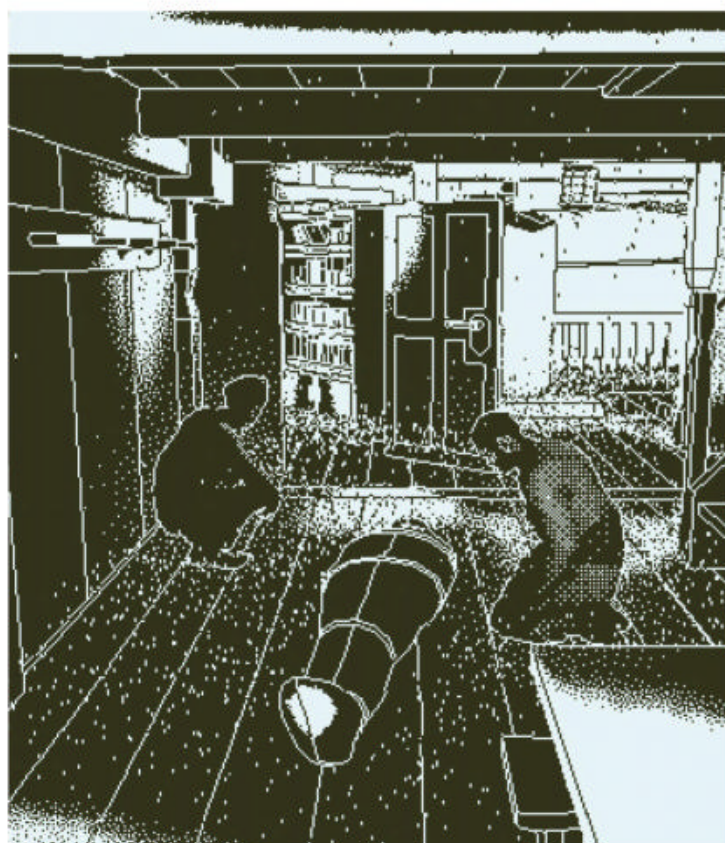
37

NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION New

Mollie: I don't even know how to put into words what *Nier: Automata* is and why it's so special, but I wish I could wipe my brain and experience it again for the first time. A flawless soundtrack, satisfying combat and heart-wrenching story permeate every second. It hasn't always run the best on PC, but a brand-new fix makes this the perfect time to dive in.

Steven: I finally beat *Automata* for the first time this year and damn, I'm so glad I did. There's just nothing like it. And while I'd love for us to also make room for *Nier: Replicant*, its prequel, on this list, I'd encourage anyone who loved *Automata* to go back and play it. It's arguably an even more emotionally compromising game.



36 RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 23 ▼

Rachel: Although it's fallen a little on our list, *Return of the Obra Dinn* is still one of the best detective games on PC. Apart from *Paradise Killer*, another fantastic detective game that you will have passed to get here, no other game makes you work harder for answers and celebrates your victories than *Obra Dinn* does. The ghostly tale it spins of the disappearance of a single ship and its crew will chill you to the bone. It still gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Phil: Possibly the most perfectly paced puzzle game around. As you explore, you'll naturally stumble into hints that can recontextualise your thinking and send you down a rabbit hole of new revelations.

Rich: I could honestly argue for this being number one, it's simply stunning. Play it!



35 KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 13 ▼

Rachel: There have been some amazing story-led games released in the last year, which means that our old friend *Kentucky Route Zero* has dropped a considerable way. Its highway adventure is still the most evocative and aetherial story on this list, full of magical-realist tales of rural America and its struggles. I'll never forget listening to a chorus of ghostly voices inside a mineshaft belonging to those who had lost their lives in a rockslide. It's both haunting and beautiful.

T100P

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34

OLD WORLD

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: I've been waiting a long time for a historical 4X game that can give *Civilization* a run for its money, and here it is. Mohawk Games has taken all the best parts of the venerable series, but focused on antiquity rather than all of human history. Every turn represents a year, which allows *Old World* to take a more intimate approach, exploring characters instead of just empires.

There are plenty of innovations, such as an Order system that teaches you to prioritise actions for that turn, but it's definitely the *Crusader Kings*-style characters and abundance of narrative events that feel like the most important addition. Leaders age, die, get married, have children, plot... and you've got a whole court of people to worry about. It's *Civ* reimaged as a life sim and RPG.

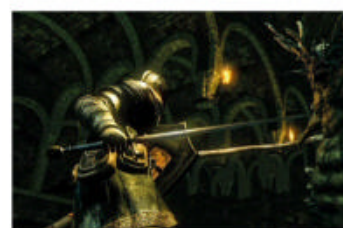


33 PLANESCAPE: TORMENT ENHANCED EDITION

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 11 ▼

Jody: There's an argument that the real defining feature of RPGs is the areas between fights where you just talk to people, and Planescape's Sigil – a city on the inner surface of a ring with magic doors that connects it to multiple dimensions – is one of the best. There's a guy who's been on fire so long everyone's used to it and he's become a local bar's mascot, a zombie called The Post whose body is used as a billboard, a hivemind of several thousand psychic rats, and a part-demon thief voiced by Sheena Easton. The combat isn't great, but there's not much of it and way more multidimensional weirdos worth meeting.

Steven: I'd recommend *Torment* as a kind of dessert to anyone who played and loved *Disco Elysium*.



32 DARK SOULS REMASTERED

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 31 ▼

Rich: The only downside to *Dark Souls*' success is that the game has been so influential that it's almost a cliché to talk about how good it is. One of the greatest adventures in games, set in a world realised with outstanding imagination, mingled with a deliberately vague and surprising multiplayer element.

James: *Dark Souls* is challenging, but like a good coach. Take a breather. Stretch out. Check yourself. Sleep on it. Come back when you're feeling better. Don't give up.



28 HUNT SHOWDOWN

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION New

Jacob: You might be wondering why *Hunt: Showdown* has only now made its way into our Top 100, many years after it first launched. The reason being this PvEvP shooter has only gone from strength to strength in 2021, incorporating steady updates, improvements, and, finally, a new and immeasurably entertaining new map.

31 DESTINY 2

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 14 ▼

Tim: A mere four years into its life on PC, I did not expect to see *Destiny 2* climbing this chart on the back of its storytelling. Once rightly derided for hiding its rich lore in grimoire cards and armour flavour text, over the last year *Destiny 2* has quietly reinvented how to create ongoing narrative in a live service game, using a combination of choreographed NPC conversations and the occasional cut-scene, a soapy plot develops from week to week, complete with twists, heel turns, and Saturday morning cartoon cliffhangers.

We've seen major characters killed off, big bads come and go (or have they?), and finally had the sense that the guardians are

actually part of an evolving universe. And it's working: keeping players interested in what's happening rather than just grinding for god-tier weapons. It also helps that the mix of matchmade activities, exotic quests and hidden missions has been refined to the point that any variance in quality is way less wild than it used to be.

And if you'd rather not pay at all, there's still an incredibly robust game entirely for free, including endgame content such as the Vault of Glass raid or the Trials of Osiris elimination mode. The only reason *Destiny 2* isn't even higher here is that the PVP side of the game has been neglected to the point of abandonment.

27 ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 46 ▲

Rich: I've literally spent 100 days (2,400 hours) of my life playing this. Some of that would have just been the game idling but... wow, time to rethink my life choices. A perfect game, and has been since launch: once the controls and rhythm get their hooks in, you'll never look back. Put it on my gravestone: my name was Richard Stanton, and I drove a rocket car.

26 STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 52 ▲

Mollie: The recent 1.5 update turned an already great game into an excellent one. The addition of tons of late-game content and quality-of-life improvements has made owning a farm, marrying a reformed alcoholic and owning a small army of truffle-sniffing pigs better than ever.



30 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Robin: For me this is quietly the most exciting co-op shooter in years. There's so many parts of it I want to talk about. Like its incredible procedural generation, churning out fresh, fascinating, and frequently beautiful levels every session. Or the satisfaction of working together to build, dig, and demolish your way to success. Or the way it makes managing light a core part of the experience in a way that adds so much drama to exploration. Oh no I've run out of words again.

29 CRUELTY SQUAD

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

James: A monstrous immersive sim, a game held together with duct tape and bad vibes. As a gig economy assassin killing men who pose a threat to a higher order of immortal CEO gods in a hypersaturated mess of jagged polygons and screaming textures, it's difficult to not feel bad. But using my guts to grapple up to a sniper nest above the Cancer Megamall? This is a shit jawbreaker with a dense pleasure chemical core. *Cruelty Squad* isn't cruel. It's just honest.



T100P

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25

INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | LAST POSITION 19 ▼

Rich: This almost feels like the isometric strategy genre distilled down to its purest drops. A game all about precision planning, the huge number of combinations you can wring out of apparently simple abilities, and quickfire playthroughs that always feel different. I don't have much appetite for the grander

turn-based strategy games any more, purely because of time, and this is the perfect replacement.

Evan: It's surprisingly grim! Reminds me of *Evangelion*. This definitely isn't the kind of mecha anime where everyone goes out for milkshakes after defeating the great evil.



24 PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION No change

Mollie: No JRPG has ever quite matched the energy *Persona 4 Golden* brings, and no game has ever led me to be so deeply attached to a ragtag group of teenagers and their terrifying bear mascot.

Morgan: Yeah, *Persona 5* has the style, but *P4* has the heart. I haven't played in nine years and I still can't get that damn Junes song out of my head.

Phil: Filled with questions like "What do these bizarre murders say about society?" and "Why is there a talking bear suit?"

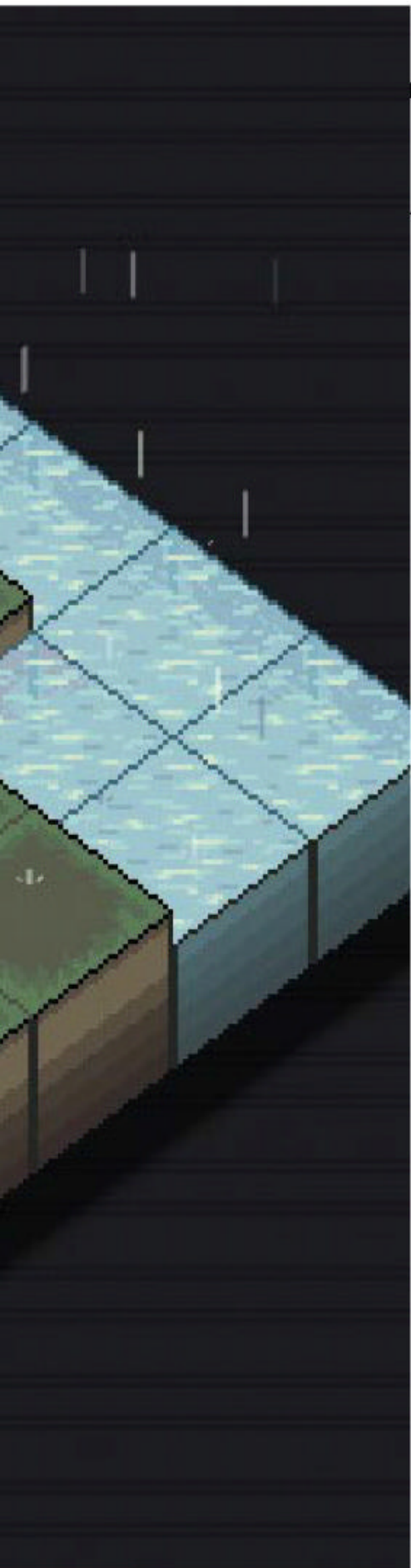
23 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 2

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION Re-entry

Jody: Unlike other *Total War* games, the things I remember from *Warhammer* happened on the battlefield. As mad-science ratmen I've killed an elf queen then dragged her corpse away under arrow-fire, and as vampire pirates I've summoned a ghost ship to drop on the proud warriors of Ulthuan. I did that as an undead opera singer named Cylostra Direfin, who pronounces her surname as 'dear-fah'.

The fantasy setting makes *Total War* ridiculous and extravagant. It's great not just because I remember highlights from multiple campaigns, but because the gonzo factions make multiple campaigns worth playing. The expansions and the way each game can be connected builds on that, meaning the best *Total War* keeps getting better.





PERSONAL PICK

Jody Macgregor



DAWN OF WAR – DARK CRUSADE

Still my favourite RTS thanks to a paint-the-map campaign where structures remain where you left them. You return to contested ground to find your defences still standing, ready to serve again. And the sync-kill animations make zooming in on combat a treat.



22 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 41 ▲

Nat: Every weekend, for the past year, I've been jumping on for a bout of *Halo 3* multiplayer like it was 2007 all over again. There's never been a shooter quite like *Halo*, and after more than a decade away, its uniquely chaotic sandbox arenas still feel as fresh as ever – whether that's a tense slayer match on Blackout, or one of many absurd Forge maps folks are playing on the collection's new server browser.

With the *Master Chief Collection* now on PC in its entirety, 343's collection has proven itself more than just a fun throwback. It's a love letter to FPS fans

– letting you dive into more than a decade of *Halo* history in a single matchmaking playlist, or revisit Bungie's truly stellar campaigns in both original and remastered forms. I may not be a fan of 343's own additions, but you can't deny the studio's done a hell of a job.

Wes: I want to thank whoever at 343 brought back *Halo 3*'s Rocket Race playlist, a mode I sank hours into more than a decade ago and still love with all my heart. A custom game browser is in the works, and once it's live, I expect classic *Halo* CTF to outlast the heat death of the universe.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



GUILD WARS 2

Still secretly one of the best and most generous MMOs around, and one that could teach most live service games a lesson. From battle passes to update cadence, *Guild Wars 2* has already solved most of the problems that other GAAS developers are still trying to figure out.



21 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 25 ▲

Evan: Folks, this is how you operate a multiplayer game. *Siege* gets four major updates a year like clockwork, adding new operators that often scramble the meta. But as it's expanded, *Siege* has simultaneously rethought some of the game's biggest systems alongside all the new additions, anti-toxicity measures, and overhauled characters. A testament to good production practices, careful roadmapping, and the insane effort it takes to maintain a popular game.



20 YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Phil: This marks the series' transition from arcade brawler to JRPG, and swaps out the stoic long-time lead Kiryu for an entirely new ex-Yakuza – an endearing goofball who can't help but wear his heart on his sleeve. It's still everything you expect from a *Yakuza* game: a lengthy main story that's filled with twists and turns, numerous sidequests that range from wacky to absolutely absurd, and a whole host of minigames that offer fun diversions to pursue as you explore.

FEATURE

The Top 100

19 UMURANGI GENERATION

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Nat: Loud, raw, angry. An anti-colonial protest wrapped in *Jet Set Radio* and *Evangelion*. Where other games fret over whether they're seen as 'political,' *Umurangi* embraces it.

Jody: The *Macro* DLC really completes *Umurangi Generation*, with bigger levels to photograph and rollerblades to get you around them.

18 DOOM ETERNAL

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION 14 ▼

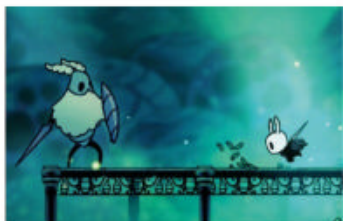
James: This was already the most intense shooter ever made, but *The Ancient Gods* expansions complicate the swirling demon chessboard even further. There's a demon you exorcise from other demons with the microwave beam. A huge hammer for turning a school of imps into paste. And you kill a couple of gods, no biggie.

17 FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 21 ▲

Steven: *FF14* takes so much of what is good about *WoW* and couples it with an emotionally-charged story, gorgeous visuals, and some of the best goddamn music ever scored for a game. There's so many MMOs, but *Final Fantasy 14* is the one you should be playing.

Nat: There's no better game for roleplaying as a gay cat.



16 HOLLOW KNIGHT

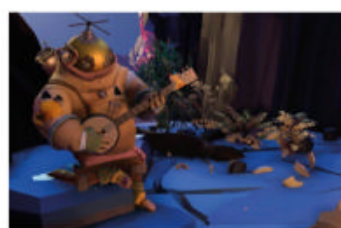
RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 8 ▼

Robin: I replayed this slick, atmospheric metroidvania only recently, and found myself utterly wowed all over again. Despite its tiny team, it's grandly ambitious, in its own way managing to evoke some of the mystery, horror, and grandeur of the *Dark Souls* series. Like its diminutive bug protagonist, it at first seems unassuming, but reveals greater and greater multitudes as you explore, its world unpeeling layers like a big, dark... onion.

15 OUTER WILDS

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 9 ▼

Phil: A remarkable exploration game in which you've got just 22 minutes to explore a small, handcrafted solar system full of questions. At the end of your time, the sun blows up and you time-loop back to the start, with nothing except the information you've gleaned along the way. The way the solar system changes over the course of the loop encourages you to keep hold of certain discoveries in order to investigate more thoroughly, making for a compelling mystery box that's a joy to unpick.



14

WILDERMYTH

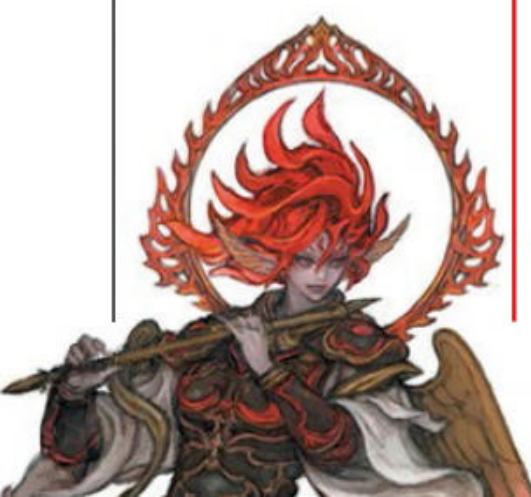
RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Rachel: One of this year's biggest surprises, and there was no doubt it would be placed somewhere in the top 15. *Wildermyth* is a fantasy adventure that manages to combine procedural stories spun from character-driven traits with procedurally generated events, the end result being a game with enough anecdotes that you could write a book.

Your decisions can dramatically affect the story, like if the rogue falls in love with the archer, if the warrior will ever fulfil her lifelong dream, whether characters die on the battlefield or retreat, losing a limb in the process. Your heroes become bruised and scarred as the campaign progresses,

reminders of mistakes you've made on the battlefield.

Characters can have children who can then join the party, and you can even bring old retired characters back for a new campaign. In this way, *Wildermyth* feels like you're weaving a mythological tapestry of heroes and their stories, not just ticking off a campaign checklist. Depending on the difficulty you choose, the game will adjust its story, choosing a tougher, crueler campaign will be complemented with a darker story – it's pretty incredible how the game can adapt like that. It's as close as you can get to the feel of a homebrew tabletop RPG, and that's pretty special.



13

DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 7 ▼

Phil: Aside from being the best stealth game of the 2010s, what makes *Dishonored 2* remarkable is that, however you decide to approach its levels, it always has a response. When I kill my target in the opening mission, I later hear his goons announce that he's dead. On a second attempt, I kill him and hide his body in an area the guards can't access – something the game never asks me to do. And yet it apparently

knew I might try, because this time the goons announce that he's missing instead. It's a small example, but later on this same attention to detail – this anticipation and extrapolation of the player's agency – applies to some really big, dramatic moments.



12 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION No change

Robin: We've written about Firaxis' modern strategy classic more times than I've lost soldiers, but there's a good reason for that. It's still the absolute gold standard of turn-based strategy on PC, a sprawling tactical puzzle that pokes at your grey matter, but crucially also tugs at your heartstrings, as you love and lose squad members. Add in the expansive *War of the Chosen* DLC, full of weird villains and technology, and you've a near endlessly replayable package. The thriving mod scene gives it even more life – including the ever-popular Long War, which turns the campaign into an even more brutal feat of endurance while cranking up the detail.

Surely we're past time for an *XCOM 3* now? Come on Firaxis, get a move on – *Chimera Squad* was barely a snack.



11 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION 2 ▼

Wes: The best traditional computer RPG of the last decade, *Original Sin 2* remarkably manages to succeed on every axis as an RPG. Its main quest is exciting and intricate, each of its premade heroes has unique stories worth experiencing, the world is crammed full of sidequests, and you can approach most problems however you want, including killing every NPC in the world like a complete psycho. Hell, if you played it in 2017, play it again: Larian spent a couple years polishing and improving it.



10 VALHEIM

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Chris: There are no quests in *Valheim*, no characters, no main storyline. But every journey I take, whether it's to fight a boss or reach a new continent or just to gather berries, feels like a bigger and bolder adventure than many triple-A RPGs. The open world is fascinatingly beautiful despite throwback visuals and the danger of the wilderness is

offset by the cozy and comforting feel of coming home to my cheery little wooden fort. *Valheim* cleverly plays with survival systems, too – food and cooking remain absolutely vital, but you'll never starve to death so gathering never feels like a joyless grind. And for an Early Access game, it never feels like anything is missing, just that more could be added.



9 THE WITCHER 3

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 4 ▼

Andy K: While I love the overarching story in *The Witcher 3* and its DLC, it's the slower, quieter moments in-between when the game really sings for me. When it's just me and my horse on the open road, riding between villages, exploring ruins, picking up random quests, and getting tangled up in peoples' lives, I'm never happier. It's like a

wandering samurai simulator. And the fact that a simple job pinned to a noticeboard can spiral into a wild, unpredictable, hours-long quest makes exploring this vividly realised world rewarding like no other RPG. This is a rare game where almost every sidequest, including the really small ones, is meaningful or interesting in some way.



8 MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 48 ▲

Rachel: I am happy to see *Minecraft* get the epic list bump it deserves. With the *Caves and Cliffs* update this year, plus Mojang's work with RTX, and the number of charities and projects using it as a gaming force for good, it deserves a top 10 spot for sure.

Mollie: I punched my first block of dirt nearly 10 years ago, and I've been in love

with *Minecraft* ever since. *Minecraft*'s versatility really lends itself to the game's longevity – after a decade, no two playthroughs have been the same for me, and I love that.

Rich: The game's community remains so vibrant and it seems like every week there are amazing new things to see, and Mojang continues to judiciously add to it.



7 SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 5 ▼

Robin: The sheer number of imitators released in recent years is testament to the lasting brilliance of *Slay the Spire*. None have toppled the king. It's still the absolute tightest, smartest, and most fun to break roguelike deck-building money can buy.

Evan: When you pull off some clever combo (say, using the Mummified Hand relic and a series of Power

cards to reduce the cost of everything in your hand to 0), the sensation of cascading effects is as potent as pulling the trigger on some viral TikTok Rube Goldberg machine. *Slay the Spire* puts game-breaking power within players' reach, but in turn drops tougher bosses and mini-bosses in your way. Few games match its purity of design.

6

DEATH STRANDING

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

James: It may feel like some old-timey *Metal Gear Solid 2* nonsense at the start, but rapidly evolves into an open-world hiking simulation about building an infrastructure co-op with strangers. I've given dozens of hours over to the cause, hauling materials to maintain our highways, dozens more to crawling up treacherous mountain peaks through blinding blizzards to create an efficient zipline network. All of it, shared with other people in their own game worlds for no tangible videogame reward other than knowing I wasn't the only one to benefit from the hard work. In a

capitalist hellworld, it gave me hope, or at least a potent homebrewed chemical signal for coping. **West:** *Smashes Like button 137 times* **Rich:** There's simply nothing like *Death Stranding*, particularly in the context of the pandemic and how eerily its concept maps onto that. For all Kojima's excesses, and some frankly honking cutscenes, the experience of traversing this world is unforgettable. You genuinely feel part of something bigger. I can't get this wonderful game out of my head, parts of it will stick with you like nothing else.

5

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 3 ▼

Andy K: No videogame world has beguiled me quite as powerfully as *Red Dead's* vast, atmospheric slice of the American West. Rockstar's Western epic is a game I frequently revisit just to do nothing: riding aimlessly around the wilderness, stopping to hunt, chat to fellow travellers, or poke around in old cabins. It's a game I like living in too. Moseying into Valentine to knock back a whisky at the saloon, grabbing a bath or a haircut, trying on some new clothes in the general store, then turning in for the night at the hotel. It's the best cowboy simulator ever made. I love the story (I've finished it twice), but just hanging out in that world is enough.



T100P

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4

APEX LEGENDS

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION 17 ▲

Nat: *Apex Legends* has always been good. Of the big battle royales, it's the best one if you just want to pick a good fight, blending solid gunplay and wild abilities with just the right amount

of *Titanfall's* hectic movement. But last year saw *Apex* truly come into its own as a confident successor to Respawn's wallrunner.

Olympus is far and away the game's best (and prettiest) map to date. Arenas provide a tense, tactical, 3v3 alternative to battle royale. And the game's cast has only gotten better and better, particularly with the long-overdue addition of Scottish people to the roster.

In 2021, *Apex Legends* isn't just a good battle royale. It's probably the best competitive shooter you can play today.

3

CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED 2020 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: Simply the best strategy game around. And it would probably be the best RPG if it wasn't for *Disco Elysium*. Everything that made *CK2* so great for nearly a decade is here, but better integrated, more refined, and improved by a whole bunch of new systems that make this sequel feel like more than a repeat.

It's huge and dense, but after just a few hours you'll walk away with enough stories to fill a book – like the time you walked into your bedroom and found a courtier having sex with your shoe, or when you 'accidentally' lost a child in the woods when you realised they were about to cause a succession crisis. Thanks bears!





2

HITMAN 3

RELEASED 2021 | LAST POSITION New

Fraser: Now that IO Interactive has completed its ambitious world of assassination, you can play all three *Hitman* games in a single package, giving you a lifetime of elaborate murders to pull off. It feels like an endless vacation where you occasionally top someone. A trip to a gaudy Dubai skyscraper one day, then off to an Argentinian winery the next, each of them bursting with potential for mischief. *Hitman 3* is an exceptional game in its own right – not least because it contains a spot-on Agatha Christie mystery where you get to play the detective – but the real selling point is getting to play the entire trilogy with all of the enhancements. It's a great excuse to revisit Sapienza for the hundredth time.

Phil: On its own, *Hitman 3* probably wouldn't be as high on this list. But *Hitman 3* as a way to access the entire trilogy – including the ever-expanding selection of escalation contracts and time-limited elusive targets – is essential. Each game has its own personality. The first is IO rediscovering its aptitude for creating intricate stealth sandboxes, and getting bolder and more experimental as it goes. *Hitman 2* ups the scale, with some of the largest levels in the series' history, each packed full of things to try. *Hitman 3* is tighter and more focused, but builds on the previous games for a confident finale full of memorable scenarios. Each mission is ridiculously replayable, and this package brings together more than 20 of them. You

could play this for years and never run out of new things to try.

James: If aliens ever invade Earth and demand to know what we humans call 'videogames,' I will give them *Hitman 3*. It has everything: espionage, geopolitical intrigue, slapstick comedy. The trilogy represents the best of game design too, working as a simultaneous sandbox and teacher. I've played the same levels dozens of times, reverse-engineering guard patrols, NPC AI behaviours, and how my weapons and tools interact with it all.

While the first run through a *Hitman* level is typically overwhelming, the options endless and threats leading to more improvisational playthroughs, my 20th go at The Dartmoor Manor with nothing but a shotgun went off without a hitch. You'd think I'd enabled cheats, the way I slipped through sightlines and manipulated the field with my shiny coins to point-blank five guards in an escalation without getting spotted. There's a reason Agent 47 is an emotionally stunted bald man: because we need someone to look up to.

Andy K: This is some of the best stealth in the history of videogames, with levels that are big, complex, and pulsing with life and detail. It's *Hitman 3*'s Berlin that really steals the show for me – a crowded warehouse rave where the tables are turned and hitmen come after you. This is a neat switcheroo, and trying to kill these guys with eyes everywhere is a challenge like no other in the series.

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1

DISCO ELYSIUM – THE FINAL CUT

RELEASED 2019 | LAST POSITION No change

Evan: A richly detailed roleplaying game about a deeply human shared experience: losing your wallet.

Encyclopedia: The creation of an Estonian studio who'd never made a videogame before, *Disco Elysium* is a revolutionary detective RPG set in the imaginary city of Revachol, and in particular its impoverished dockside district of Martinaise, whose politics serve as a mirror of our own.

Drama: Good sire, you neglect what's most important. *Disco Elysium* gives your skills a voice, and the more points you put in them the more likely they are to interject with their own observations, whether helpful (like when I point out a character who may be lying to you), or unhelpful (like whatever nonsense Electro-Chemistry is about to inflict upon us).

Electro-Chemistry: You both forgot what really matters. *Disco Elysium* open-palm slams you right into the poetic streaming consciousness of a shambling maniac who broke his brain with a whole lot of drugs. Yummy, yummy drugs.

Wes: It's a marvel that *Disco Elysium* manages to make the warring voices of your brain funnier, more compelling

companions than typical RPG followers. The way your skill points affect how active they are in conversations and how their dialogue helps you understand your character and the world around you – it's just brilliant. I can't think of another RPG that makes bad dice rolls so much fun, either. I never felt the urge to savescum in *Disco Elysium*

because there was always a clever bit of dialogue waiting for me, even when I literally fell on my ass.

Evan: Exactly: the way that those different brain voices passively interject based on how much you've developed them – and the fact that they can still betray you and offer bad advice! – is genius and reflective of what it feels like to be human. A person with 'Level 10 Empathy' can still make a bad decision by listening to that empathy at the wrong moment. In this, I love how much *Disco* cares about what I don't say. A numbered list of dialogue options shouldn't be a series of cabinets you rummage through

to get the stuff inside. What you say affects the world and reflects who you are.

Fraser: *Disco Elysium* was close to the perfect RPG when it first launched, but miraculously ZA/UM has managed to make it even better. In a huge free update, the studio added full voice acting, something I didn't feel that was missing until I heard it. Even your internal monologue gets the treatment, with a superb performance from Lennal Brown giving your skills and inner thoughts even more personality. As a bonus, there are a bunch of political vision quests, too, which serve to create a climax for your journey of self-discovery. As challenging as some of the subject matter is, it's an unmissable game.

Andy K: Still unbeatable. Every RPG I've played since, I've thought to myself: "I wish this was more like *Disco Elysium*". The sheer variety of ways to shape your character – and how people in the world react so specifically to what you've moulded this grotesque lump of cop-shaped clay into – makes it a role-playing

experience like no other. I can't remember the last time I was so completely consumed by a game's setting and atmosphere either. I'm listening to the

I CAN'T THINK OF ANOTHER RPG THAT MAKES BAD DICE ROLLS SO MUCH FUN

Whirling-in-Rags (the extra dreamy 12pm version) as I type this, and I want to be back there, interrogating burly dockworkers, singing heartbreaking karaoke, and slowly piecing together what I did on my apocalyptic bender a few nights before. *Disco Elysium* is a truly singular game. There's never been anything like it, and there probably won't be ever again, even if ZA/UM makes a sequel.





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